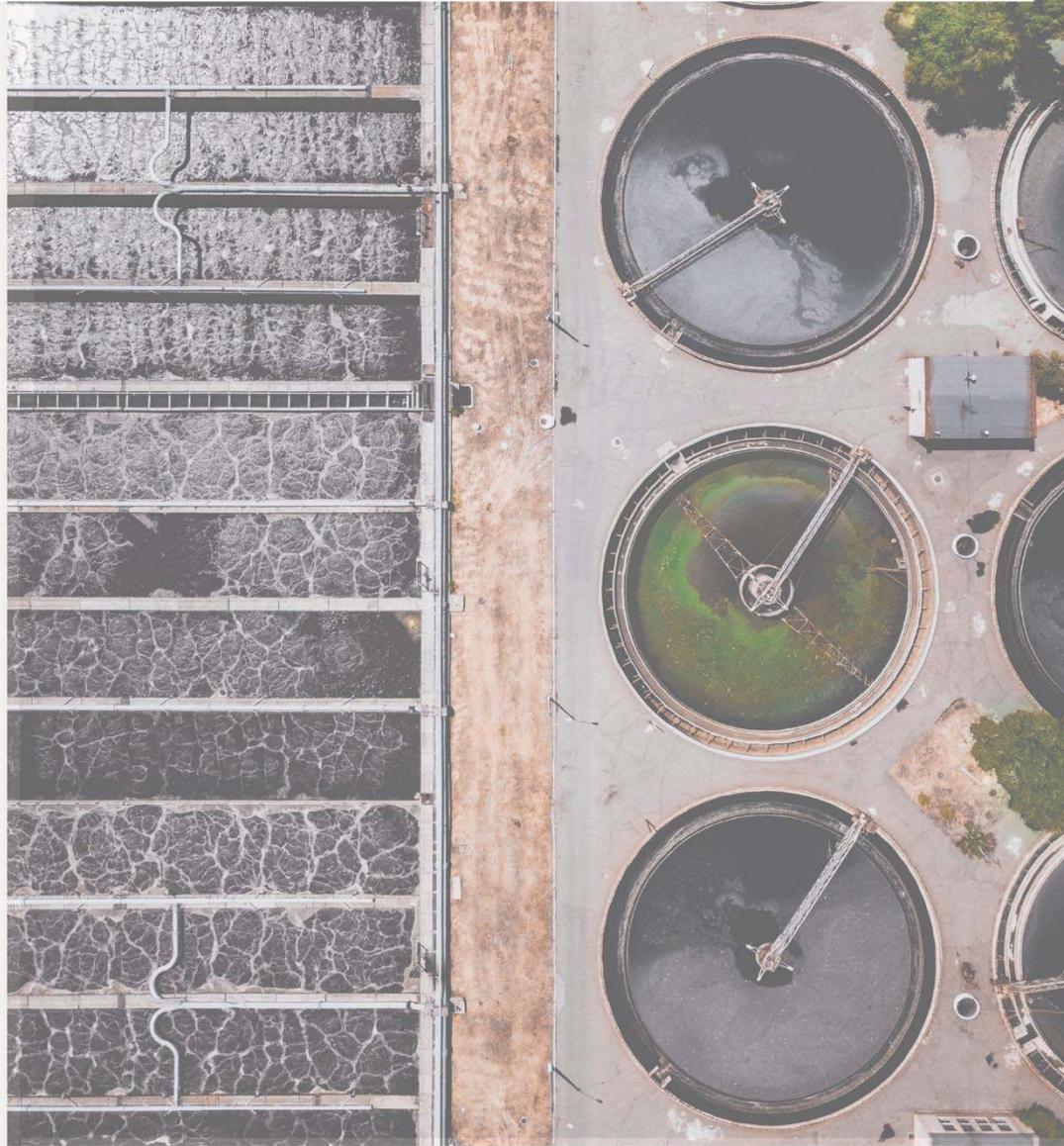




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Compendium

Good practices and lessons learned of the response of local governments and public utility companies of six Western Balkan economies in the provision of water and sanitation services during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Table of Contents

List of abbreviations.....	4
List of Figures	5
Executive summary	6
Key insights and takeaways	6
Provision and quality of services	7
Human resources and staff management	7
Cooperation and support	8
Communication with the public	9
Crisis management.....	9
The way forward.....	9
1.1 Context.....	12
1.2 Background and objectives	12
1.2.1 Background of this Compendium	12
1.2.2. Objectives of the research.....	13
1.2.3. Target groups	13
1.3 Methodology and limitations.....	14
1.3.1 Methodology	14
1.3.2 Online survey questionnaire.....	14
1.3.3 Limitation and challenges	15
1.3.4 Structure of the document.....	15
2. The response to the COVID-19 crisis in the provision of water and sanitation and other communal services – a regional snapshot	16
2.1 Provision and quality of services.....	16
Overall impact of the COVID-19 crisis on the services/ activities	17
Remote provision/digitalisation of services	19
Delivery and reporting of WSS.....	20
Additional activities and services provided during the COVID-19 crisis.....	22
2.2 Staff and human resources.....	23
The overall impact on the staff/employees of LGs and PUCs.....	23
Working conditions.....	24
Work from home and protection of staff.....	24
Benefits provided to staff/employees.....	25
2.3 Support and cooperation	26
Support from the central government and other entities on the national and international level.....	27
Support from APUCs and LGAs.....	28
2.4 Crisis management.....	29
2.5 Communication with the public	30
2.6 The way forward	31
Good practices and lessons learned during the COVID-19 pandemic	33
JKP "Kostajnica" d.o.o.....	34
Vodovod i Kanalizacija D.O.O. Podgorica	35
JKP "Vodovod i Kanalizacija" Obrenovac	36
JP "Vodovod" – Kumanovo.....	37
Shoqëria Ujësjiellës Gramsh	38
KRU Gjakova	39
Conclusions and recommendations.....	40
Conclusions.....	40
Recommendations	43
Annex 1: Good practices and lessons learned list	47
References.....	48

List of abbreviations

Abbreviation	Full description
AAM	Albanian Association of Municipalities (AAM)
ADKOM	Association of Communal Service Providers in the Republic of North Macedonia
AKM	Association of Kosovo Municipalities
AMCFBiH	Association of Municipalities and Cities of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina
APUC	Association of Public Utility Companies
AQUASAN	Aquasan Network in Bosnia and Herzegovina
ATMRS	Association of Towns and Municipalities of the Republic of Srpska
AWM	Association of Waterworks of Montenegro
AWRS	Association of Waterworks of Republic of Srpska
BMZ	Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development
CD	Capacity Development
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
EU	European Union
GIZ	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit GmbH
GWOPA	Global Water Operators' Partnership Alliance
IAWD	International Association of Water Service Companies in the Danube River Catchment Area
IDF	Investment and Development Fund
IFI	International Funding Instrument
LG	Local Government
LGA	Local Government Association
LGU	Local Government Units
NALAS	Network of Associations of Local Authorities of South-East Europe
ORF MMS	Open Regional Fund for the Modernisation of Municipal Services
PPE	Personal Protection Equipment
PR	Public Relation
PUC	Public Utility Company
RCDN	Regional Capacity Development Network for Water and Sanitation Services
RWC	Regional Water Company
SCTM	Standing Conference of Towns and Municipalities
SECO	Swiss State Secretariat for Economic Affairs
SEE	South-East Europe
SFRY	Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia
SHUKALB	Water Supply and Sewerage Association of Albania
SHUKOS	Water and Wastewater Works Association of Kosovo
UMM	Union of Municipalities of Montenegro
UPKP	Association of Employers of Utility Companies in Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina
UTVSI	Association of Water Technology and Sanitary Engineering
VAT	Value Added Tax
WASS	Association for water protection and preservation in the South of Serbia
WB	Western Balkans
WSS	Water and Sanitation Services
ZELS	Association of Units of Local Self-government in the Republic of North Macedonia

List of Figures

- Figure 1: Level of measures across target economies 17
- Figure 2: Overall impact of the COVID-19 crisis on the operation of LGs and PUCs in target economies..... 18
- Figure 3: Ensuring uninterrupted provision of essential public services 19
- Figure 4: Water consumption during the COVID-19 lockdown..... 20
- Figure 5: Remote metering across target economies..... 21
- Figure 6: Reporting the water consumption during the COVID-19 crisis..... 22
- Figure 7: Impact of Covid-19 over the staff / employees of PUCs and LGs in target economies 23
- Figure 8: Adaptation measures of working conditions within PUCs/LGs in target economies 24
- Figure 9: Percentage of employees who worked from home during the Covid-19 crisis 25
- Figure 10: Main benefits provided to staff of LGs and PUCs during the COVID-19 crisis 26
- Figure 11: Cooperation between LGs and PUCs across target economies..... 27
- Figure 12: Support provided by the relevant national authorities, IFIs/donors, other stakeholders, etc. 28
- Figure 13: Cooperation with LGAs and APUCs..... 29
- Figure 14: Availability of Crisis management plans in LGs and PUCs..... 30
- Figure 15: Communicating the COVID-19 crisis with the local community..... 31
- Figure 16: The way forward 32

Executive summary

Since the World Health Organization identified COVID-19 as a global health pandemic on March 11, 2020, **the Local Governments (LGs), especially their Public Utility Companies (PUCs) have been heavily affected by its impact.**

While most of the Western Balkans economies are reinforcing their health systems to face the second wave of the pandemic, **LGs and PUCs alike are working around the clock to continue the uninterrupted provision of essential services to their communities.** In addition, people and experts are assessing the impact and drawing plans for the post-COVID recovery of their institutions and communities. Although it is still premature to draw any conclusions for the long-run, **LGs and PUCs in cooperation with their associations, national authorities and other stakeholders** are consulting local actors and preparing strategies to ensure safe and sustainable future for communities.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a test, demonstrating that cooperation between stakeholders operating on the local, regional and national level is the key to overcoming a global crisis with local implications. Both LGs and PUCs are at the forefront of the COVID-19 crisis, "fighting" to cope with its adverse health, social and economic effects, coordinate local actions and activities, **and ensure the uninterrupted provision of essential public services.** In this regard, the current analysis further highlighted the importance of collaborative approaches to address the short and long-term challenges and constraints of the COVID-19 pandemic. **On the one hand, a strong PUCs can only exist if there is strong and committed support from the LGs and vice versa.** On the other hand, both institutions rely on the **local community's support and appreciation** to prosper and deliver their services most efficiently and transparently.

The German Agency for International Cooperation (GIZ) is currently preparing **new COVID-19 related measures on behalf of the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ)**, aiming at strengthening the resilience of LGs and PUCs from the Western Balkans. For that purpose, **the Centre for Development and Promotion Promo Idea – Strumica (Promo Idea)** was commissioned by **GIZ, in the frame of the Open Regional Fund for the Modernisation of Municipal Services (ORF MMS)** to prepare three (3) analyses of the COVID-19 responses of LGs and their PUCs, as well as the relevant stakeholders in **6 Western Balkan economies**¹. The insights, conclusions and recommendations provided in the analyses will further enhance the capacity of the **Regional Capacity Development Network for Water and Sanitation Services (RCDN)**, established with the support of GIZ, and will form the basis for the establishment of the newly emerging body of practice in the field of crisis management.

The Compendium, prepared in the frame of Analysis 1, **focuses on identifying, collecting and systemising good practices and lessons learned of the responses by the LGs and PUCs of 6 Western Balkan economies in the provision of water and sanitation services (WSS) during COVID-19 pandemic.** It is primarily intended for **managers/practitioners working in the field of WSS and policy makers engaged in facilitating and coordinating CD initiatives in the Western Balkans to support the LGs and their PUCs to improve their response to the crisis plan for recovery in the post – COVID-19 period.**

The rapid assessment is based on data collected through a targeted online survey, conducted for the purpose of the analysis, but also on **qualitative research by online interviews** with pre-selected representatives of LGs and PUCs of the target Western Balkan economies. In particular, focus was placed on around five different key aspects of public service providers, i.e. the **provision and quality of services, human resources and staff management, cooperation and support, crisis management and communication with the community.** The key insights on each of these aspects have been summarised below.

Key insights and takeaways

As in most areas of the world, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused a lot of negative impacts on many municipalities and communities across the Western Balkan economies. As the impact of the pandemic has been felt worldwide, strict lockdown measures that have been imposed on the national and local level by most economies of the Western Balkans to respond to the unknown threat. These restrictions have rendered the key

¹ Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia

public service providers in a challenging position, regarding ensuring the continuous delivery of the essential communal services in their local communities.

Key sector indicators show that in most SEE economies, the WSS sector faces many challenges in the transition from old economic systems to a free-market economy. The Western Balkans economies are no exception. In addition, the PUCs, operating there have also to accommodate new regulations or EU accession requirements. Other key challenges include insufficient managerial and technical competencies as well as poor financial performance, combined with a complex institutional landscape. COVID-19 has brought forward and highlighted all these issues. The crisis is affecting almost every aspect of the LGs and PUCs operations and activities to a similar extent.

Provision and quality of services

While much of the economic and social life has been shut down, **essential public services have continued in all economies**. LGs and their PUCs needed to assure proper service-delivery to allow for sufficient operations regarding the new challenges that derive from the COVID-19 crisis in adherence to the heightened standards and ensuring the necessary hygiene safety in public areas. PUCs are especially obliged to continue to provide services 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. The survey results showed **no records of disruptions of drinking water supply or wastewater collection and treatment operations** due to the pandemic. **The quality of drinking water has been insured**, in compliance with requirements and standards. In some cases, chlorination has been slightly increased, following the relevant health authorities' directions and with the objective to reassure users rather than as a reaction to health concerns.

On the one hand, the strict lockdown measures that have been imposed on a local and national level by most economies of the Western Balkans have rendered the key public service providers in a very difficult position. LGs and PUCs had to ensure the continuous **delivery of the essential communal services in their local communities while maintaining their financial and institutional integrity**.

The analysis shows that during the COVID-19 pandemic, **both LGs and PUCs had to introduce new activities/services which have not been envisaged in the annual work plans**. These included various social welfare and healthcare services, social services, frequent disinfection of public buildings/ facilities, streets, areas, etc. Additionally, as the majority of residents were spending more time at home, this led to **increased disposal of municipal waste and increased water consumption**. As a result of the increased sanitation and disinfection activities, it was necessary to increase the quantities of essential supplies for the provision water and sanitation services (i.e. chemicals, detergents, reagents, spare parts, etc.).

The COVID-19 crisis has been a chance for both LGs and PUCs to solve many problems and issues that have been long overdue. Some long-term stereotypes and myths such as digitalisation have been debunked overnight. Digitalisation process of local services, including communal services, has been boosted by the pandemic, despite the fact that many LGs and especially PUCs did not have operating online platforms and internet portals to provide one-stop-shop services to their citizens. **Many PUCs have rushed the procedures to enable online payment of utility bills through their websites, i.e. embedding special online payment modules, informing customers through e-mails with instructions on paying bills online.** However, some smaller PUCs have experienced difficulties in setting up and operating an online payment system, due to absence of a functional website, administrative issues, insufficient human resources, finance, etc.

Primary data of the desk research and survey results show that the **majority of PUCs lack remote water metering solutions introduced in their serviced communities**. As a result, many PUCs were challenged and experienced various difficulties in metering and reporting water consumption during the COVID-19 crisis (e.g. hindered communication with users; minimal access to water metering devices; consumer complaints of introduced reporting mechanisms/methodologies; etc.).

Other longstanding challenges such as becoming greener, utilising sustainable energy, adopting circular economy measures, introducing green solutions, etc. are next on the line.

Human resources and staff management

While infrastructure investments, often in focus of the central governments and International Financial Institutions (IFIs), are essential for ensuring the provision of high-quality, cost-efficient and inclusive WSS

services, experience has shown that these **need to be matched consistently with the improvement of managerial and operational capacities of the LGs and PUCs.**

During the COVID-19 crisis, the PUCs, primarily owned by LGs, were put in a situation to provide more services with less equipment, resources and fewer people. As a result of the strict social distancing, health and other restrictive measures, the existing human resources and expertise were reduced. **LGs and PUCs had to cope with and manage the separation of shifts, sparing of vulnerable groups** (e.g. people with previous health issues, people with special needs, the elderly, women with small children) **from exposure to contacts, assign non-essential personal to work from home, take care of residents in rural areas, etc.**

Research data shows that **the COVID-19 crisis had influenced their employees' productivity in various aspects** (i.e. delivering social and sanitary services; remote work; operational units of employees in the field of waste collection and WSS; etc.). LGs observed a positive tendency that their employees needed less time to do the same work they did before the pandemic, due to the introduced flexible working time, fear of losing their jobs, etc.

Working conditions in both LGs and PUCs were also adapted. The most common adaption measure was related to the increased sanitary activities in the work premises and the provision of the necessary personal protection equipment (PPE) for ensuring the necessary protection of employees. A typical adaptation measure introduced in many local administrations included the separation of employees into smaller independent groups with as fewer contacts among different groups as possible. Larger LGs introduced temperature control on the entrance of administrative buildings. Other similar activities included the rotation of shifts in order to ensure the limited contact between people of different shifts.

The findings of the survey in the target Western Balkan' economies **showed that less than 10% of employees of LGs/PUCs were sent to work from home.** Based on the recommendations of the relevant health authorities, employers were obliged to provide employees with the instructions for work from home, if possible due to the nature of work, i.e. work process requirements, online platforms usage, data protection requirements, etc.

As LGs prepare for work after COVID-19, building a resilient workforce is a top priority for local agendas. **This means balancing productivity and outcomes with safety.** Creating and ensuring safety at work is essential. In this aspect, research results show that the most common benefit that has been provided to the staff of the majority of LGs and PUCs was related **to the availability and improved safety and protection equipment** (i.e. sanitation services, PPEs, distancing, strict rules, etc.). **Employers were also provided with both formal** (i.e. unemployment compensations, fringe benefits, sick leave, unpaid leave, etc.) **and informal support** (i.e. flexible working hours, flexible sick-leave policies, childcare benefits, etc.).

Cooperation and support

The pandemic response revealed new ways of collaborating across an ecosystem of partners and introduced methods for operating more effectively. Cooperation between LG and PUC is necessary in any case, especially in times of crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. **A strong PUC can only exist if there is substantial and committed support from the LG and vice versa.** Strengthening the intracommunity relationships established during the crisis can create a more significant and more integrated role for all local actors (i.e. businesses, non-governmental institutions, etc.). Vertical collaboration with the national authorities and donor community, and their support to LGs and PUCs in providing WSS and other communal services during COVID-19 pandemic is essential to improving their resilience and response to future crisis.

Results of the survey indicate that the majority of LGs stated that rely on the support of the central government (i.e. Ministries, Agencies, etc.), IFIs / Donors and other stakeholders (i.e. chambers of commerce, business associations, non-governmental associations, etc.) to receive timely and adequate guidance, technical assistance or resources related to the delivery of certain public services, that have been impacted by COVID-19 crisis.

Associations of PUCs (APUCs) and Local Government Associations (LGAs) are a strong support to their members, PUCs and LGs respectively, in terms of **capacity development (CD), opportunities for exchange of experiences and best practices in combating the pandemic, and in particular in articulating their needs and advocating** for identified key issues such as liquidity of PUCs, prolongation of obligations towards international and domestic financial institutions, obtaining additional financial assistance from domestic and international financial institutions and joint communication of important messages to the public.

Communication with the public

Education and literacy are essential in the process of managing a health crisis. The COVID-19 pandemic made people more aware of the role of public institutions in their lives. The focus on public services offers a window of opportunity to re-establish the public service brand. The challenge of fighting a pandemic is also an opportunity for WSS that are, in normal conditions and when everything works, "invisible", but when the service does not work then they are high on the agenda of the public. **Therefore, the community's communication and constant feedback is essential, especially** when citizens demand more than ever the provision of punctual and timely information. This is an opportunity to change the perception of WSS, LGs and PUCs and to return it in a positive sense in the focus of the public and to achieve a greater appreciation of WSS and the efforts of LGs and PUCs to ensure their smooth operation and greater coverage of services.

Data of the research shows that LGs and PUCs have **communicated regularly with the local community** on their services and activities in relation to COVID-19. The regular information flow was facilitated through **public awareness campaigns, media campaigns, collaboration with community organisations, printed materials, phone banks, updating web information, setting up local call centres to provide information, and translating materials into appropriate languages.**

From the perspective of LGs and PUCs, society mostly demanded information on the health and prevention measures implemented regionally and locally. The most common question that PUCs have received during the initial lockdown was **related to the drinking water's safety** (i.e. the possibility for transmission of COVID-19 via drinking water) and the relevant health and safety protocols/standards that have been adopted in that direction. Furthermore, information has been sought on the frequency of disinfection activities, payment of bills, the possibility of paying bills and receiving services online, ensuring the uninterrupted water services provision, etc. Many local businesses requested a postponement of payments for public services, taxes, etc. Additionally, many citizens have expressed their gratitude and appreciation for public servants' work during the crisis.

Another somewhat positive nuance of the crisis which has been shared by a significant number of LGs and PUCs is related to the overall impression that the **pandemic helped in increasing the appreciation and public image of the communal services**, including the **uninterrupted supply and access to water** that was provided and ensured by the public service providers.

Crisis management

The COVID-19 pandemic and the crisis it caused imposed "Crisis Management" as a priority topic. Despite the fact that majority of public utility companies in the states of the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) have protocols for working in emergency conditions, the preliminary analysis conducted by APUCs and LGAs showed that many PUCs and LGs lack crisis management strategies and operating procedures to cope with crisis situations, especially such as the one resulting from a global pandemic threat.

Analysis of the research data shows that most LGs and PUCs established a local crisis management team/headquarters to address the crisis and coordinate the decision-making process. However, it is evident that the establishment, participants and main functions/activities of this unit/team were not based on a preliminary developed crisis management plan. Decision making structures on the local level were severely impaired due to lack of knowledge on how to manage crisis situations, and associations as service providers to LGs and PUCs yet lack a proper emergency coordination and communication schemes between each other and with the other, specifically national stakeholders. Furthermore, the analysis revealed the need for capacity building in the field of Crisis management where LGAs and APUCs may play an important role.

The way forward

Even though the short-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic are quite adverse, the experience and lessons learned by both LGs and PUCs should establish capacities and skills that will help local stakeholders better manage a future crisis. **Here are the most appropriate recommendations that have been identified as a result of the analysis.**

Digital transformation is on the doorstep of every company and institution. It is considered as one of the key horizontal aspects that enables resilience. Investing in LGs and PUCs efforts to adopt digital technologies for enabling safety, efficiency, transparency, and higher productivity should be at the heart of recovery efforts and

strategies. **Digital transformation strategies and action plans for LGs and PUCs** should be developed to ensure the digital transition to increase efficiency, transparency, facilitate information flow and protect employees' health and safety in case of emergencies. In order to facilitate water metering, **investing in remote water metering solutions as part of the recovery strategies and support** is essential. To ensure economic justification, such solutions could be provided to only a part of users as PUCs should develop a set of criteria, based on which such transformation should happen (i.e. business customers, domestic customers in remote areas, etc.).

Governments across target WB economies should pay particular attention in **activating special funds and recovery programmes subsidies for LGs with limited financial capacities**. Specific attention should be paid to small and underdeveloped communities. PUCs should also be added as a direct beneficiary in funding instruments, providing them with adequate liquidity support (based on financial health and prospects), grants and subsidies. PUCs would require particular attention, including liquidity support, activating grants and subsidies targeted for their needs, improving access to finance, and alleviating some of the financial parameters and requirements. When it comes to government response, it is essential to further **speed-up the decentralisation processes, fiscal relieve measures and activating grants and subsidies for all LGs, and in particular for those with limited financial capacities**. Particular attention should be paid to small and underdeveloped communities.

Now, more than ever, **LGs and PUCs should be involved through their LGAs and APUCs in the process of planning and developing both local and national recovery strategies**. LGs should start paying particular attention to public involvement as local strategies should be developed with all stakeholders and the community's active participation. This should be done to increase the ownership of recovery strategies and build sustainable networks to cope with similar future crises.

With restricted mobility, whether due to social distancing requirements, health requirements or disrupted public transport, **many LGs and PUCs have promoted remote working to the extent possible**. It is therefore critical that as many employees as possible are able to work from home effectively. Action plans should be developed and adopted to allow for **quickly switching to remote working to improve the resilience to future crisis**. Such plans should take into account the existing state of the institution/company and plan/develop a Materials and Tools Checklist for remote work to be used when necessary, including equipment and infrastructure (laptops, communications, remote working software, document distribution tools, communication channels, etc.), documentation policies and data protection (not all necessary hard copy documentation required for work can be taken home), list of tasks/services/activities that can be provided remotely, etc.

Public and private sector innovation can make a significant contribution to the immediate and short-term response and resilience by engaging LGs and PUCs in more research and cooperation projects (i.e. research on how to detect viruses in sewage waters/drinking water, crisis management practices, CD activities for crisis management, and digitalisation strategies, etc.). APUCs and LGAs, as well as other collaborative networks and mechanisms such as RCDN, could be closely engaged, especially in the field of R&D and CD activities.

Community engagement and direct participation in the processes is essential. Therefore, it is necessary for PUCs in cooperation with LGs to streamline the engagement of local communities into their operations and policies to ensure their sustainability and increase ownership of measures/solutions, implemented locally. In that sense, the local community can provide valuable input and support (prior actual investments take place) to choose non-regret measures.

Crisis management has been identified as both a deficiency and a potential solution for increasing resilience for future crisis. Preparing comprehensive risk management strategies and plans, especially in the WSS, including detailed risk assessment, existing infrastructure and equipment screening, communication, vulnerability assessment, critical services identification, training and rehearsals, etc. is essential. Although LGs have adopted risk and disaster management strategies, they should be revisited, updated and adapted to prepare for, respond to, mitigate and recover from all types of emergency situations, including such resulting from a global pandemic. **The existence and regular update of such strategies, along with other tools and activities ensured and coordinated on the national level will help LGs and PUCs to be better prepared for preventing, detecting, responding to, and recovering from various emergencies and crises**. It will also help ensure the utility's resilience to re-organise operations and workflows swiftly and efficiently. These strategies should be developed with broad participation of the local community and stakeholders.

In terms of crisis management, **local practitioners and decision-makers should be equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge to develop strategies** to cope with a potential future crisis. **APUCs and LGAs as well as their regional networks have a critical role to play in this process by offering customised capacity development measures.**

1.1 Context

Municipalities and PUCs had to ensure continuity of their service provision to guarantee enough hygiene standards for citizens even in crisis times. PUCs need to assure proper service-delivery to allow for sufficient operations regarding the new challenges that derive from the COVID-19 crisis in adherence to the heightened standards and ensuring the necessary hygiene safety in public areas. LGs, on the other hand, had to coordinate the process of supervising the enforcement of the social distancing and disinfection measures and continue the interrupted provision of essential communal (i.e. administrative, social, infrastructure, healthcare) services and activities. Therefore, the cooperation between PUCs and LGs as their founders is essential in any case, especially in times of an unprecedented crisis such as the one caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. A strong PUCs can only exist if there is strong and committed support from the LGs and vice versa. Furthermore, both these institutions rely on the support and appreciation of the local community to prosper and deliver their services in the most efficient and transparent manner.

Associations of PUCs (APUCs) and Local Government Associations (LGAs) are a strong support to their members, PUCs and LGs respectively, in terms of capacity development (CD), opportunities for exchange of experiences and best practices in combating the pandemic, and in particular in articulating their needs and advocating for identified key issues such as liquidity of PUCs, prolongation of obligations towards international and domestic financial institutions, obtaining additional financial assistance from domestic and international financial institutions and joint communication of important messages to the public.

As part of the German Agency for International Cooperation (GIZ) - Open Regional Fund for the Modernisation of Municipal Services (ORF MMS), a regional programme, commissioned by the BMZ, a project was designed in order to establish a self-sustaining Regional Capacity Development Network for Water and Sanitation Services (RCDN) aiming at the development of professional and skilled WSS workforce in the Western Balkans. The project enables 16 LGAs and APUCs from six Western Balkan economies, as well as the regional organisations NALAS, IAWD and AQUASAN, to facilitate and coordinate CD initiatives in the region and to support the delivery of CD measures to PUCs and LGs in the respective economies. The project provides the necessary assistance for introducing and enhancing functional capabilities, procedures and instruments that allow the RCDN partner associations to deliver fee-based CD products to PUCs and LGs in an effective manner. The project is jointly financed by the German Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and the Swiss State Secretariat for Economic Affairs (SECO).

The Centre for Development and Promotion Promo Idea – Strumica (Promo Idea) was commissioned by GIZ - **ORF MMS** to prepare three (3) analyses of COVID-19 responses of LGs and their PUCs as well as the other relevant stakeholders in the 6 Western Balkan economies. The main objectives of the analyses are focused on collecting and sharing the newly generated COVID-19 related experiences, good practices and lessons learned of the responses of the LGs and their PUCs as well as on their horizontal collaboration (on the local level) and their vertical collaboration with the national authorities and donor community, in the provision of WSS during COVID-19 pandemic. LGAs and APUCs as well as the regional organisations NALAS, IAWD and AQUASAN, all members of the RCDN, provided support in the communication and distribution of questionnaires to their member PUCs and LGs.

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1.2 Background and objectives

1.2.1 Background of this Compendium

The research and analysis that provided the necessary information for the needs of the present Compendium were carried by the Association Center for Development and Promotion "Promo Idea" – Strumica as part of a consulting service assignment in the frame of the GIZ ORF MMS. The Fund has proposed several intervention

measures to the BMZ to support the municipalities and their PUCs, which have been severely affected by the effects of the corona crisis, in carrying out the necessary safety, health and preventive measures to overcome the consequences of the COVID-19.

The consulting services provided by Promo Idea will result in the following deliverables:

- 1) **Analysis no. 1** - "Compendium of good practices and the lessons learned of the responses of the LGs and PUCs in the 6 Western Balkans economies in the provision of water and sanitation services during COVID-19 pandemic";
- 2) **Analysis no. 2** - "Compendium of good practices and the lessons learned of the support provided by the Ministries, Regulatory authorities, IFIs/ Donors and other stakeholders to LGs and PUCs in the 6 Western Balkans economies to maintain the provision of water and sanitation services during COVID-19 pandemic"; and
- 3) **Analysis no. 3** - "Assessing the financial impact of COVID-19 on the operation and performances of PUCs in the 6 Western Balkans economies".

The second Analysis will be focused on the Ministries, Regulatory authorities, IFIs/ Donors and other stakeholders, good practices and lessons learned on their support provided to the municipalities and PUCs in the 6 Western Balkan economies. The main sources of information are the Associations of municipalities (LGAs) and associations of public utility companies (APUCs).

The third Analysis will review the PUCs of six Western Balkans economies to assess the financial impact of COVID-19 pandemic on their operation and performances. Following the adopted methodology, the primary sources of information for the analysis are pre-selected PUCs through their Associations.

1.2.2. Objectives of the research

The present document summarises the results of Analysis no. 1 which focuses on identifying, collecting and systemising good practices and the lessons learned of the responses by the LGs and PUCs of 6 Western Balkans economies in the provision of WSS services during COVID-19 pandemic. It points out the key findings and lessons learned for each country. The study looked in-depth into the experiences of selected LGs and PUCs of the target economies. Following the adopted approach, the primary sources of information for the analysis are LGs and PUCs through their associations, LGAs and APUCs. For achieving more integrity, they are structured around five different key aspects of public service providers, i.e. the provision and quality of services, human resources and staff management, cooperation and support, crisis management and communication with the community. The insights, conclusions and recommendation gathered in the frame of the research process and outlined in the present document will form the basis for the establishment of the newly emerging body of practice in the field of crisis management that will be shared further within the regional network (i.e. the RCDN) thus helping members to improve their response to the crisis and plan for recovery in the post – COVID-19 period.

1.2.3. Target groups

The research that was carried out for the needs of preparing the present document involved the following target groups:

- Managerial staff (e.g. general/technical managers, head of department, experts/employees, etc.) of PUCs in target economies who manage and coordinate the delivery of essential communal services in local communities.
- Decision-makers in LGs (e.g. mayors/vice mayors, general secretaries, municipal experts, heads of departments, etc.) engaged in the overall management and coordination of the delivery of essential communal services in local communities.
- Representatives (e.g. experts) in the RCDN partner associations (APUCs and LGAs).

1.3 Methodology and limitations

1.3.1 Methodology

The Analysis has been based on a comprehensive research process consisted of 3 main phases:

- 1) **Phase 1:** Desk and internet research
- 2) **Phase 2:** Quantitative research by online survey
- 3) **Phase 3:** Qualitative research by online interviews with pre-selected representatives of LGs and PUCs of the target Western Balkan economies.

During the initial phase of the research process, a thorough desk and internet research was conducted by analysing available documents and information in each of the 6 target economies. The process included a review of internal project documents (e.g. Conclusions and recommendations from the RCDN Webinars and other reports provided by the RCDN members), online research (e.g. analysis of the web sites of the RCDN and its partner associations) and other relevant studies (e.g. NALAS survey in SEE, UTVSI/SCTM survey in Serbia, etc.). The desk research's main objective was to identify potential good practices and lessons learned in advance, so the quantitative and qualitative research can be targeted appropriately.

The **Quantitative research phase** of the research process included the implementation of an online survey that aimed to gather more information, feedback and concrete examples on the responses of LGs and their PUCs in the provision of WSS during COVID-19 pandemic. It targeted both managerial staff (e.g. general managers, technical managers, etc.) of PUCs who manage and coordinate the delivery of these essential services, as well as decision-makers in LGs (i.e. mayors, secretaries, etc.). The survey was translated and disseminated across each of the target economies in the period November – December 2020.

The different phases of the research have involved a total of 222 participants, of which 162 representatives of PUCs and 60 respondents of local governments from the target economies. It was carried out with the active support and assistance of the 16 national associations, APUCs and LGAs, as well as the regional organisations NALAS, IAWD and AQUASAN, all members of the RCDN in South-East Europe.

The **Qualitative phase of the research process** aimed to gather a deeper inside of the identified potential good practices and lessons learned of the online survey and desk research to be presented in the final chapter of the Compendium. For that purpose, the research team, in cooperation and with the active support of the LGAs and APUCs contacted pre-selected representatives of LGs and PUCs to share further experiences and insights on the adopted practices and management models in various aspects, targeting their response to the COVID-19 pandemic and its influence on their services, staff and human resource, management models, communication practices, etc.

The input was gathered through individual interviews with each of the target groups' identified representatives in each participating economy. The interviews were carried out in the period December 2020, following a pre-developed interview guideline that aimed to motivate respondents to further explore and describe their answers and feedback of the online survey process. As part of the process, a total of 23 representatives of PUCs and LGs were contacted of which 14 representatives of PUCs agreed to participate in the process and shared their insights and personal experience on the topic.

1.3.2 Online survey questionnaire

The questionnaire that was utilised for the quantitative phase of the research was developed in close cooperation with the staff of the GIZ ORF MMS office in North Macedonia. It was translated, contextualised and disseminated with the assistance of the experts and representatives of the national associations, the APUCs and the LGAs, all members of the RCDN. The questionnaire included the following sections:

- **Part 1: General information** – it included questions to gather some background information on the respondents (e.g. names, position, location, population served, etc.). It also aimed to gain a better overview of the restrictive measures imposed locally and their stringency index (i.e. mild, moderate, strict, etc.).
- **Part 2: Delivery of water and sanitation services** – it aimed to explore to what extent crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic influenced the delivery of communal services, especially in the field of WSS. It

also included questions to help identify the main challenges that PUCs and LGs had to cope within the process of delivering WSS in their communities.

- **Part 3: Human resources and staff management** – it explored the influence on the staff and human resources involved in the delivery of the essential communal and administrative services in PUCs and LGs. The questions included touched upon various aspects of the staff, such as motivation, productivity, occupational health and safety, etc.
- **Part 4: Cooperation and support** – this section aimed to explore the overall cooperation and support that PUCs and LGs received by the various institutions and stakeholders on the regional and national level (i.e. Ministries, Agencies, APUC/LGAs, Regulatory authorities, IFIs/ Donors and other stakeholders) in regards to their response in the delivery of certain public services that have been impacted or necessary as a result of the COVID-19 crisis.
- **Part 5: Crisis management** – it touched upon the particularly relevant issue related to crisis management and the overall preparedness of the PUCs and LGs to cope with the ongoing crisis, as well as their needs to manage better the COVID-19 crisis, as well as any future crisis.
- **Part 6: Communication and public relations** – in times of crisis communication with the public is vital. This part included questions related to the overall transparency of the public sector response to the COVID-19 crisis.
- **Part 7: Further contact** - It requested that further information be provided for potential good practices that have been implemented by PUCs / LGs related to the COVID-19 response in the delivery of public services in the field of WSS.

For most of the questions, multiple answers and the provision of further information were possible.

1.3.3 Limitation and challenges

The following challenges and limitations were identified during the analysis process:

- When designing the online questionnaire, the challenge was to collect as much information as possible without making its completion difficult and time-consuming, especially in a particularly busy period of the year for most representatives and managerial staff of PUCs and LGs. In this aspect, open-end questions were reduced to a minimum number, and multiple-choice questions were provided with pre-developed statements for the participants to choose from and rate. Participants, however, were provided with the opportunity to provide links to external documents and resources (e.g. internal document, announcement, PR for the media, etc.), which they could share, instead of writing themselves.
- Some information gathered might be generic and subjective due to the limited information being available. The good practices and the lessons learned are based on relatively limited data, compiled mostly by the online questionnaires and further online interviews. The later provided a particular logistic challenge due to the period of the year, when the research took place, and the limitations resulting from the online setting and the respondents' language.
- During the field research, some interviewees were reluctant to provide more information on their good practices and lessons learned due to lack of time and due to the limitations caused by online communication and interaction with the research team.
- The entire communication with target respondents (i.e. LGs and PUCs) has been conducted only through their relevant association on the national level, which constituted an additional administrative burden that slowed down the flow of information.
- Not all existing PUCs and LGs were covered in the research process, such as 81 LGs in the Republic of North Macedonia and 146 LGs and 60 PUCs operating on the territory of the Republic of Serbia.

1.3.4 Structure of the document

The Compendium is divided into three main sections. It follows the adopted common structure of the online survey questionnaire and the developed guidelines for the research's qualitative phase. Following this introductory section, Section 2 provides a regional snapshot overview of the response to the COVID-19 crisis in the target Western Balkan economies, presented in accordance with the main sections of the online survey questionnaire. Additionally, insights into the existing documents and information gathered in the frame of the desk research are utilised to provide further insights on the particular topic/aspect. Section 3 provides an overview of the situation and overall response to the COVID-19 pandemic on a country level. In addition, there are individual good practices/lessons learned that have been implemented by PUC/LG related to the COVID-19

response in the delivery of public services in the WSS sector in their communities. The last section presents the conclusions and recommendations that emerge from the findings and analysis of this study.

2. The response to the COVID-19 crisis in the provision of water and sanitation and other communal services – a regional snapshot

In most SEE economies, the WSS sector faces many challenges in transitioning from old economic systems to a free-market economy. The PUCs have also to accommodate new regulations or EU accession requirements.

LGs and PUCs in the Western Balkans face significant constraints in providing sustainable public services, including services in the field of water and sanitation spheres. Key challenges include insufficient managerial and technical competencies as well as poor financial performance, combined with a complex institutional landscape. The PUCs have also to accommodate new regulations or EU accession requirements.

While infrastructure investments, often in focus of the central governments and IFIs, are essential for ensuring the provision of high-quality, cost-efficient and inclusive WSS services, experience has shown they need to be matched consistently with the improvement of managerial and operational capacities of the municipalities and PUCs.

Provided below is an aggregated summary of the results that have been gathered through the desk research, online questionnaires and targeted field interviews. The structure of the summary follows the adopted methodological approach, focusing on the key aspects related to the operation and management of LGs and PUCs in the field of provision of key public services, including water and sanitation services. These aspects include **provision and quality of services, human resources and staff management, cooperation and support, crisis management and communication with the community.**

2.1 Provision and quality of services

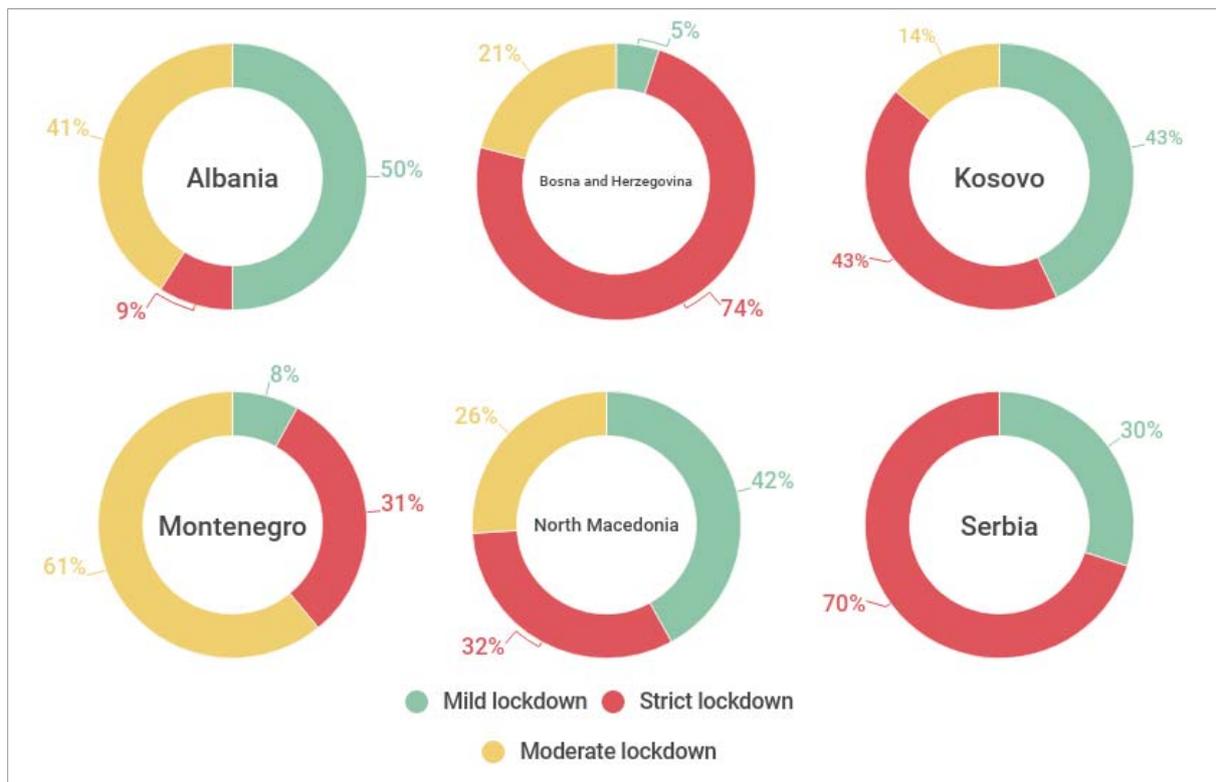
As in most areas of the world, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused a lot of negative impacts on many municipalities and communities across the Western Balkan economies. As the impact of the pandemic has been felt worldwide, strict lockdown measures that have been imposed on the local and national level by most economies of the Western Balkans to respond to the unknown threat. These restrictions have rendered the key public service providers in a challenging position, regarding ensuring the continuous delivery of the essential communal services in their local communities.

Most of the LGs covered by the analysis have enforced restrictive measures that have been enforced locally to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on the online survey responses, the majority of local communities have enforced strict lockdown policies (i.e. shutdown of all non-essential services/businesses, including a curfew, etc.). Due to the rapid spread of the virus, LGs had to deal with frequent changes in restrictive measures, turbulent administrative and social environment, while being on the front line of providing essential services for their citizens.

Furthermore, in the context of the COVID-19 crisis, a key challenge has been the extreme rapidity with which the measures to ensure continuity of service had to be designed and implemented. Until mid-February, the outbreak of the COVID-19 was not expected in Europe, at least not with the intensity it then showed, and lockdown measures were taken and enforced by governments with a timeframe of a few days.

Figure 1 provides a comparison of the measures that were imposed locally in the communities that have participated in the online survey, conducted in the frame of the current analysis. The restrictions were slowly lifted in May-August 2020 and gradually came back at the beginning of October 2020. The current timeframe of restrictions is still unknown and depends very much on the pandemic's overall development.

Figure 1: Level of measures across target economies



Overall impact of the COVID-19 crisis on the services/ activities

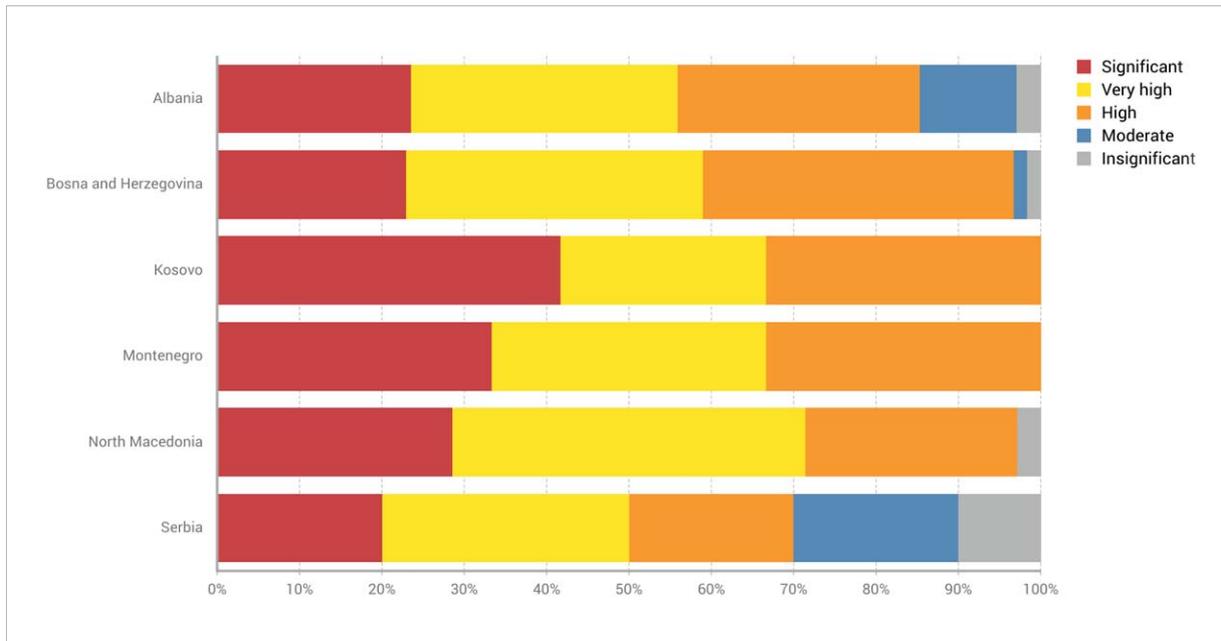
While much of the economic and social life has been shut down, essential public services have continued in all economies. Public service providers (i.e. LGs and PUCs) must adapt rapidly and manage in-between crisis response, pandemic control and long-term recovery. LGs and their PUCs need to assure proper service-delivery to allow for sufficient operations regarding the new challenges that derive from the COVID-19 crisis in adherence to the heightened standards and ensuring the necessary hygiene safety in public areas. COVID-19 has brought forward and highlighted all these issues. The crisis is affecting almost every aspect of the LGs and PUCs operations and activities to a similar extent. On the one hand, the strict lockdown measures that have been imposed on a local and national level by most economies of the Western Balkans have rendered the key public service providers in a challenging position. LGs and PUCs had to ensure the continuous delivery of the essential communal services in their local communities while maintaining their financial and institutional integrity.

According to the NALAS Survey results, the COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on all SEE local governments, although at different levels.

Similar research conducted by the Association of Kosovo Municipalities on the emergency needs and socio-economic impact of the COVID-19 crisis in the local government in Kosovo identified a similar tendency, showing that the crisis has impacted all local government units at a different level, i.e. management difficulties, financial shortages, social and health issues, etc.

Similarly, the data of the online survey conducted for the needs of the present analysis, showed the majority of participants of both the LGs (58,3%) and PUCs (61,73%) rated the overall impact of the COVID-19 crisis on their services/activities as either very high or significant (**Figure 2**).

Figure 2: Overall impact of the COVID-19 crisis on the operation of LGs and PUCs in target economies

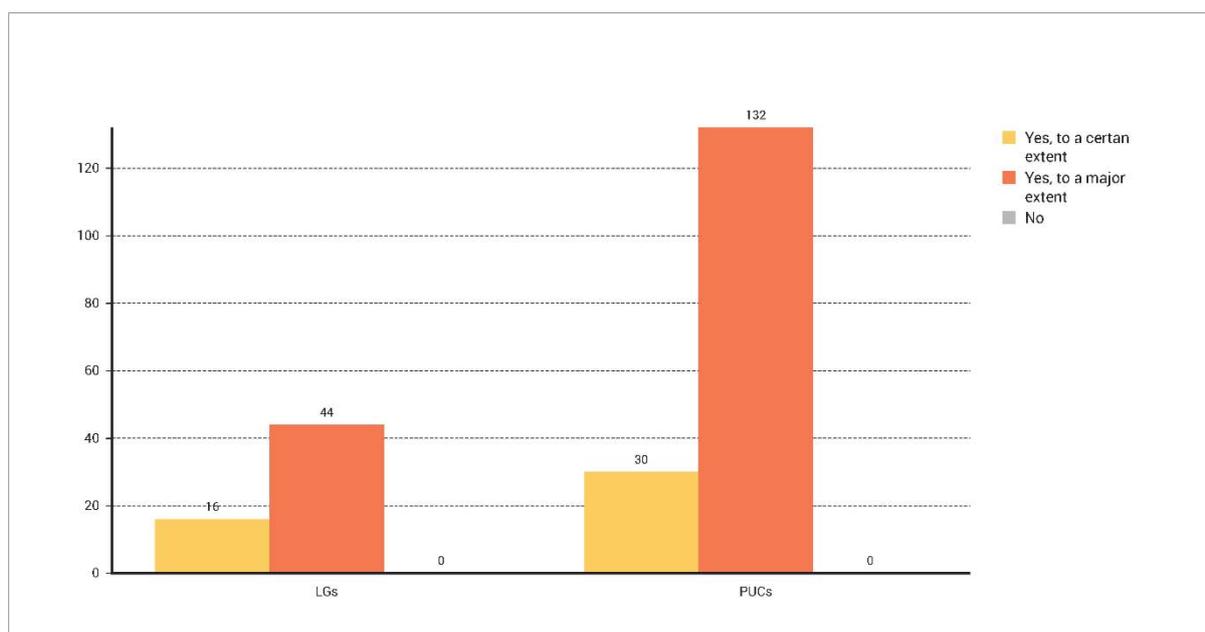


Only a small number of respondents (6,17% of PUCs and 13,3% of LGs) were confident enough to share that the COVID-19 pandemic and the crisis it caused had only an insignificant or a rather negligible impact on their operations. From the results of the survey, it could be concluded that there is a clear relationship between the level of restrictions that were imposed locally and the identified impact.

The crisis caused by the COVID-19 virus pandemic has put hygiene as one of the primary needs where water is necessary to maintain both personal hygiene and the hygiene of private and public spaces. Therefore, PUCs were obliged to continue to provide services 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Even though both LGs and PUCs were largely caught unprepared to deal with this unprecedented crisis, a vast majority of the participants in the online survey (both PUCs and LGs) shared that they have managed to ensure continuity and regular operation of communal services, including WSS in their community during the COVID-19 crisis (**Figure 3**). In total, 73% of the representatives of LGs and 81% of PUCs shared that they were able to ensure the uninterrupted delivery of essential communal services to a major extent.

Although the majority of surveyed representatives of PUCs and LGs shared that they were able to ensure an interrupted provision of key communal services, including WSS, many of them highlighted that they had to learn how to adapt and manage the crisis in the process. The survey results showed that this tendency is most visible among the surveyed managerial staff of PUCs (58% either agree or strongly agree) and less evident among representative of LGs (47% agree or strongly agree).

Figure 3: Ensuring the uninterrupted provision of essential public services



The effects of the COVID-19 crisis over the operation and activities of both LGs and PUCs have been quite diverse and on different levels. All participants in the survey **strongly agreed** to the statement that their organisation/institution had to adapt quickly to the new realities and continue to provide services 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Both representative of PUCs (79%) and LGs (82%) either agreed or strongly agreed that they had to add additional services to their general portfolio of WSS services (i.e. disinfectants, disinfection of public spaces and public institutions, etc.). Another somewhat positive nuance of the crisis which has been shared by a significant number of respondents of both target groups (46% of PUCs and 57% of LGs) is related to the overall impression that the pandemic helped in increasing the appreciation and public image of the communal services that were provided by the LGs through their PUCs.

Remote provision/digitalisation of services

Even though similar surveys (NALAS, 2020) have identified digitalisation as both a challenge and a response to the crisis, the immediate transition to digital services has been demanding. On average, only about one-fifth of individuals in the six Western Balkan economies used the internet to connect with public authorities in 2019 (OECD, 2020). This has been confirmed by the majority of LGs representatives who either **disagreed or slightly disagreed** that the process of digitalisation of local services, including communal services, has been boosted by the pandemic. According to the NALAS survey, before the pandemic, many LGs and PUCs did not have operating online platforms and internet portals to provide one-stop-shop services to their citizens. The survey results showed that throughout the course of the pandemic, a bit more than one fourth (28,7%) of the surveyed LGs have organised a remote provision of certain administrative and communal services. These included: provision of some administrative services online, where the existing online infrastructure allowed; submitting official requests/notifications via e-mail; home delivery of official excerpts from municipal registers to customers; the timing for issuing permits for works on public areas has been shortened, as utility and telecommunications companies had the opportunity to submit requests for such permits via e-mail; introduction of online platforms for reporting problems with the delivery of public services. Some administrative services were provided in remote/alternative locations. For example, the local administration of the City of Bihać, BiH organised the provision of certain administrative services and tasks remotely at the Refugee Camp "Lipa" (20 km from the headquarters of the PUC Bihać).

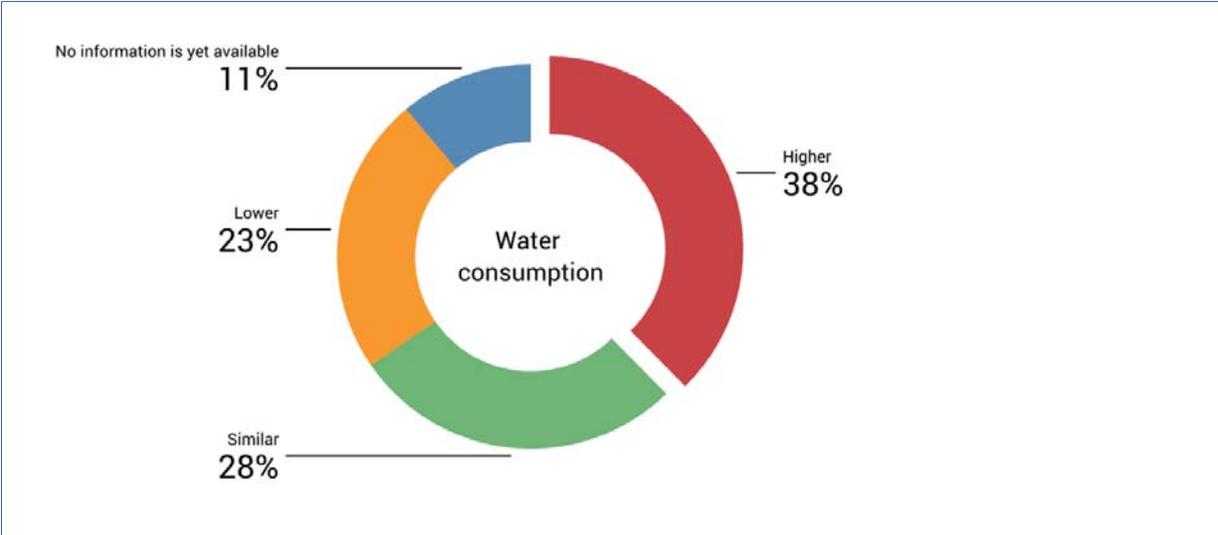
PUCs, on the other hand, also had to organise and manage the remote provision of certain services during the COVID-19 lockdown (e.g. certain administrative services, payment of bills, etc.). Some of the identified practices included: online payment of bills; using the website of companies to report problems and submit inquiries; possibility for reporting water consumption by customers online; holding regular work meeting of staff online using popular online meeting platforms; etc.

In a nutshell, PUCs have rushed the procedures to enable online payment of utility bills through their website, i.e. embedding special online payment modules, informing customers through e-mails with instructions on paying bills online. However, some smaller PUCs shared difficulties in setting up and operating an online payment system, due to absence of a functional website, administrative issues, etc. Good practices related to digitalisation of essential communal services are presented in the subsequent sections of the Compendium.

Delivery and reporting of WSS

The crisis caused by the COVID-19 virus pandemic has put hygiene as one of the primary needs where water is necessary to maintain both personal hygiene and the hygiene of private and public spaces. Therefore, PUCs are obliged to continue to provide services 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. As part of the online research and subsequent interviews with selected representatives of PUCs across target WB economies, respondents were asked to share their knowledge on the total amount of water consumption in March-October 2020 in relation to the same period in 2019. The results show that 38% of PUCs have reported an increase in the amount of water consumption, 28% state that the volume of water consumption is somewhat similar to the levels in 2019 (Figure 4).

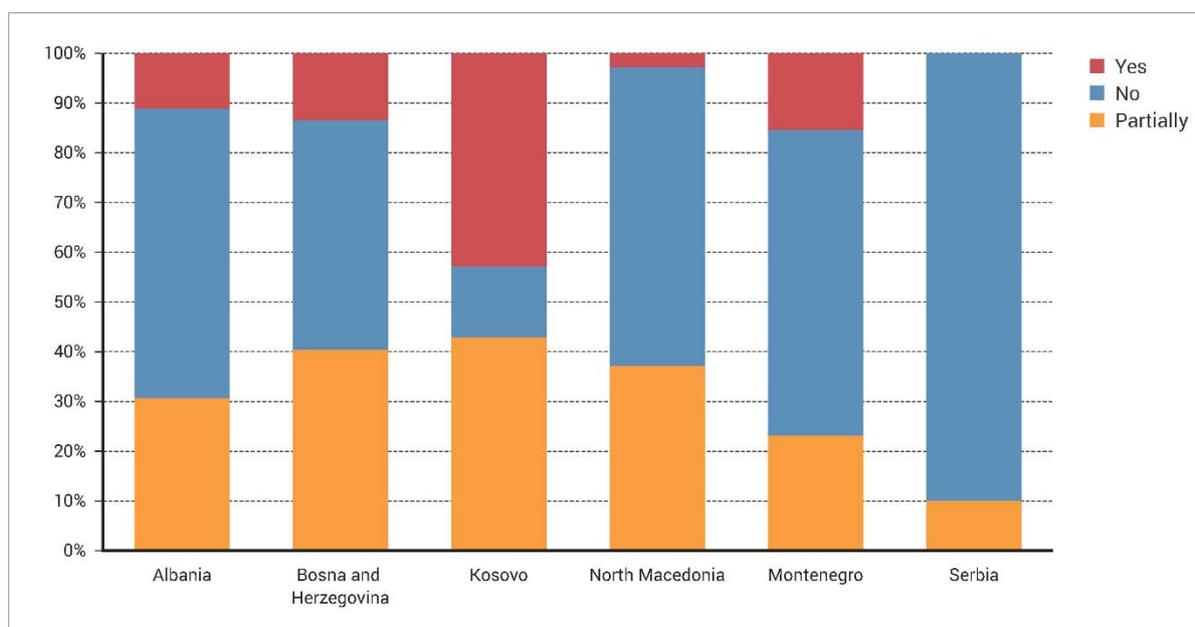
Figure 4: Water consumption during the COVID-19 lockdown



Additionally, the amount of water consumption has been reported higher in households and lower for business customers, which directly relates to the imposed lockdown measures in all economies, especially in the economies where more strict limitations were enforced. This also had a direct financial impact on the finances of PUCs since the tariff for business entities is usually higher than the one for households.

On average, less than **11 % of responding PUCs** have stated that they have remote water metering solutions introduced in their serviced communities. Some 55% reported that their company does not operate remote water metering infrastructure. However, approximately 34% of respondents state that their companies have partially introduced such solutions (Figure 5). Representatives of PUCs were asked to reflect **on the difficulties in the process in the process of metering and reporting water consumption** during the COVID-19 crisis.

Figure 5: Remote metering across target economies



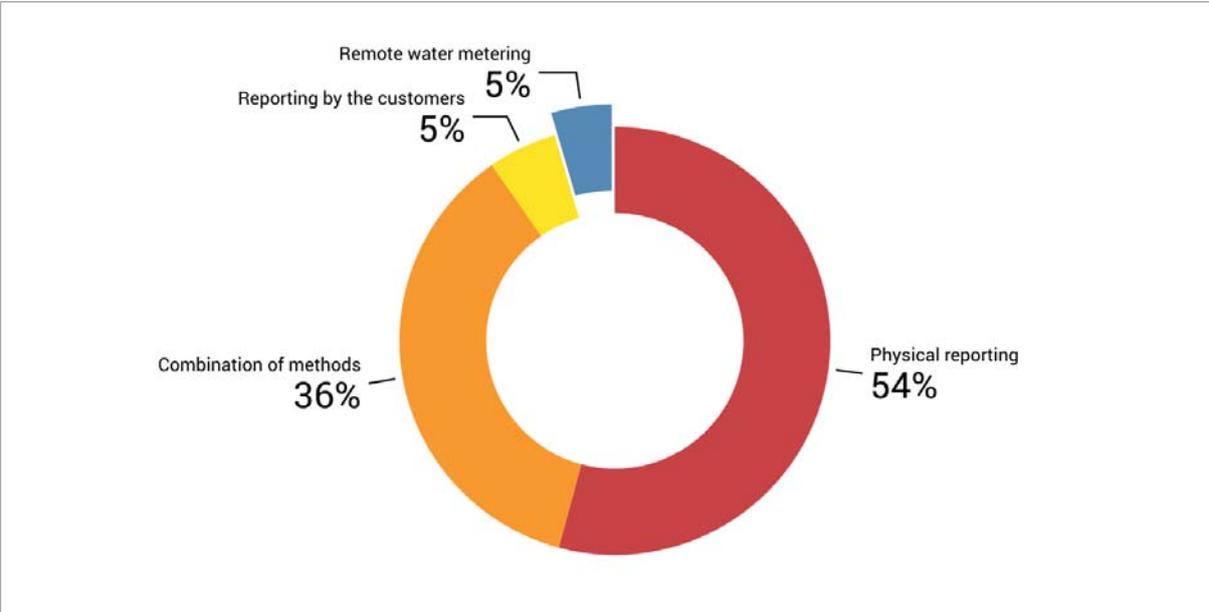
Despite the fact that 61,2% of the respondents stated that they did not experience difficulties in the process of metering and reporting, it is important to highlight that as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, **PUCs that lack remote water metering solutions have faced various reporting issues such as** incomplete records of the amount of consumed water, unpaid water amount, lack of financial documents, etc. Listed below are the most prominent problems that have been highlighted by PUCs in all target economies with regards to metering and reporting of water consumption during the COVID – 19 crisis:

- ❖ **Hindered communication with users** – due to the adverse challenges related to the human resources of PUCs, the regular contact and communication with customers had been reduced which in many cases rendered PUCs staff unable to respond and explain the existing issues related to water metering, water quality and sanitation activities.
- ❖ **Hindered or minimal access to water metering devices** inside the premises of both residential and business premises – this prevented partially or entirely the appropriate reading of water meters. In some reported cases the water consumption has not been tracked for several months. Customers were afraid to admit the staff of PUCs inside their property/business premises due to fear of COVID-19 transmission.
- ❖ **Consumer complaints about the charged water consumption** – due to fact that in many cases the water consumption was based on an estimate from the previous period, there have been many customers who objected the calculations. Further information on this issue is provided in the subsequent sections of the report.

PUCs implemented these measures to ensure both the health and safety of their employees and the people involved in the process of reading and reporting the water consumption, but also to protect the health of their customers, many of which have been afraid to admit outsiders to their homes/vacation houses/business premises due to fear of COVID-19 transmission.

Despite the challenges imposed by the unfolding crisis resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, PUCs had to continue with the regular reporting of the water consumption of both domestic and business customers. The survey results showed that more than half of the **PUCs (54%)** had still utilised physical reporting of water consumption, although this process has been hindered due to the reasons described above. Approximately **36% used a combination of methods (i.e. physical reporting, reporting by customers and remote metering, where available)**, as many PUCs have been estimating water consumption by comparing either with the previous months or it with the same period of 2019. Less than 5% of PUCs utilised remote metering solutions and/or reporting by customers when access to their premises has been limited (**Figure 6**).

Figure 6: Reporting the water consumption during the COVID-19 crisis



Additional activities and services provided during the COVID-19 crisis

During the COVID-19 pandemic, both LGs and PUCs had to introduce new activities/services which have not been envisaged in the annual work plans. These included various social welfare and healthcare services, social services, frequent disinfection of public buildings/ facilities, streets, areas, etc. Additionally, as the majority of residents were spending more time at home, this led to increased disposal of municipal waste and increased water consumption.

Additionally, according to the majority of LGs (65%), the number and volume of certain communal activities/services included in the municipal administration's annual work plan have not changed dramatically during the pandemic. However, 35% of LGs observed an increased in the provision of certain public services such as sanitation and disinfection of public buildings, facilities and streets; municipal waste collection; provision of drinking water, etc. Some of these services were not included in municipalities' annual implementation plans (i.e. preparation of disinfectants, disinfection of public and administrative buildings, streets, public spaces, markets and other open areas, etc.). The facts suggest that as a result of the increased sanitation and disinfection activities, it was necessary to increase the quantities of essential supplies for the provision WSS (i.e. chemicals, detergents, reagents, spare parts, etc.).

Similarly, PUCs needed to assure proper service-delivery to allow for sufficient operations regarding the new challenges that derive from the COVID-19 crisis in adherence to the heightened standards and ensuring the necessary hygiene safety in public areas. In this aspect, most PUCs have introduced new services such as preparation of disinfectants, disinfection of public spaces and public institutions, etc. Some **67% of PUCs shared that they had to perform certain activities/services during the COVID-19 pandemic, which have not been envisaged in the PUC's annual work plan.** These included mostly **disinfection of public buildings and institutions, open public areas (i.e. markets, parks, etc.); functioning and maintenance of disinfection checkpoints in cities and other settlements; maintenance of disinfection vehicles and equipment; etc.** Some PUCs shared that they were obliged to increase the amount of chlorine in drinking water, based on the relevant health authorities' recommendation. PUCs had to rapidly organise in cooperation with local authorities, the procurement of a large amount of sodium hypochlorite and disinfection of public areas, facilities and equipment, and disinfection and personal protection equipment (PPE).

The majority of responding **PUCs (68,5%)** indicated that they did not observe any particular shortages during the period of the crisis, as little more than **one-third (31,48%)** are on the contrary opinion and have shared that such deficiencies have been observed, especially in the beginning of the crisis (March – April 2020). There is a clear relationship between the good communication and cooperation between PUCs and their LGs in the process of ensuring the availability of essential supplies and equipment to ensure the constant and uninterrupted provision of public services.

During the second wave of the COVID-19 epidemic that struck Europe and the Western Balkans in September 2020, most LGs and the PUCs stated that their main concerns were related to keeping their employees and the public safe. Additionally, equally important were their fears related to the crisis's economic/ financial consequences as the response phase has put them in a difficult position. They also shared that they have concerns about implementing and financing ongoing infrastructure investments (where applicable), which have mainly been put on hold during the crisis.

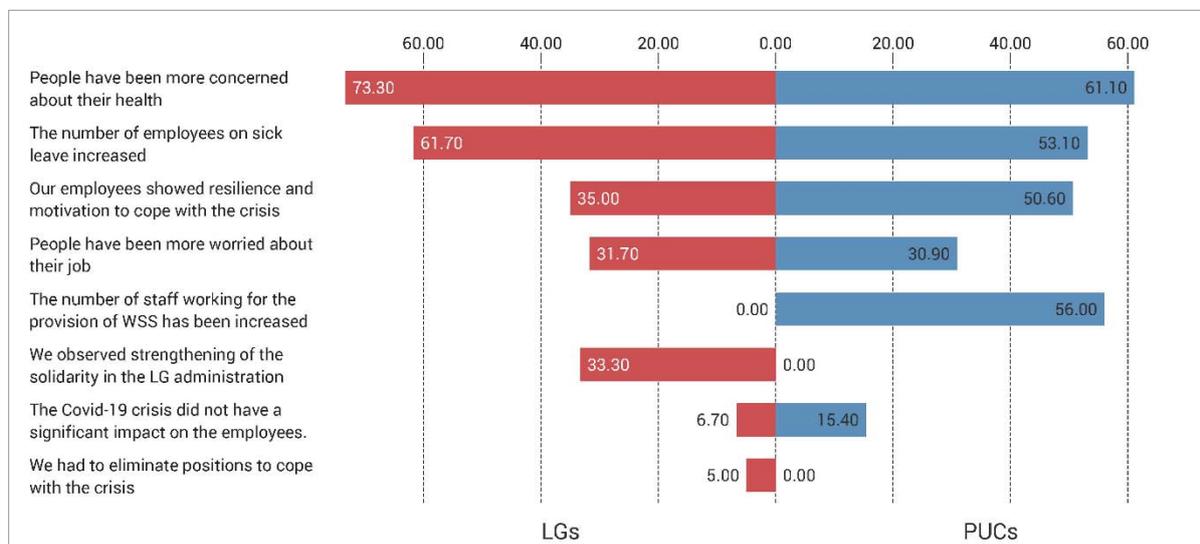
2.2 Staff and human resources

Local governments in the target WB economies are at the forefront of the COVID-19 crisis, having to cope with its adverse health, social and economic effects. Besides the ultimate responsibility to ensure stable WSS continuity in this delicate time, local water supply & sanitation departments face severe consequences in safeguarding public health in various social and economic spheres. During the COVID-19 crisis, the PUCs, primarily owned by LGs, were put in a situation to provide more services **with less equipment, resources and fewer people**. As a result of the strict social distancing, health and other restrictive measures, the existing human resources and expertise were reduced. Due to the recommendations of the local or state headquarters for crisis management, LGs and PUCs had to cope with and manage the separation of shifts, sparing of vulnerable groups (e.g. people with previous health issues, people with special needs, the elderly, women with small children) from exposure to contacts, assign non-essential personal to work from home, take care of residents in rural areas, etc.

The overall impact on the staff/employees of LGs and PUCs

Despite all of the challenges mentioned above the interviewed representatives of the decision-making and management structures of LGs and PUCs have recognised the role and dedication of their staff and employees in coping with the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic (**Figure 7**). Less than 16% of the surveyed representatives of PUCs and 6,7% of LGs indicated that the COVID-19 crisis did not have a significant impact on their employees.

Figure 7: Impact of Covid-19 over the staff/employees of PUCs and LGs in target economies



The majority of LGs (73,3%) and PUCs (61,1%) have indicated that their employees and staff were mostly concerned about their colleagues and families' health and well-being. This is entirely normal, as, during the initial months of the pandemic, there have been many fear and uncertainty in both the health and economic aspects of the ongoing crisis. Both the representatives of PUCs and LGs confirmed that their employees showed resilience and motivation to cope with the crisis and help their communities overcome the crisis. This fact clearly relates to the observed positive tendencies in increasing the productivity of the staff working in PUCs and LGs. According to the interviewed managers of PUCs and decision-makers of LGs, the COVID-19 crisis had influenced their employees' productivity in various aspects. Employees delivering social and sanitary services have improved their productivity, as most of them have been involved in resolving various issues and unforeseen situations during the pandemic period. Employees who worked remotely during the period increased their productivity. According to

an internal audit in the Municipality of Tuzla, BiH the quality of certain services and tasks implemented by employees working from home had improved.

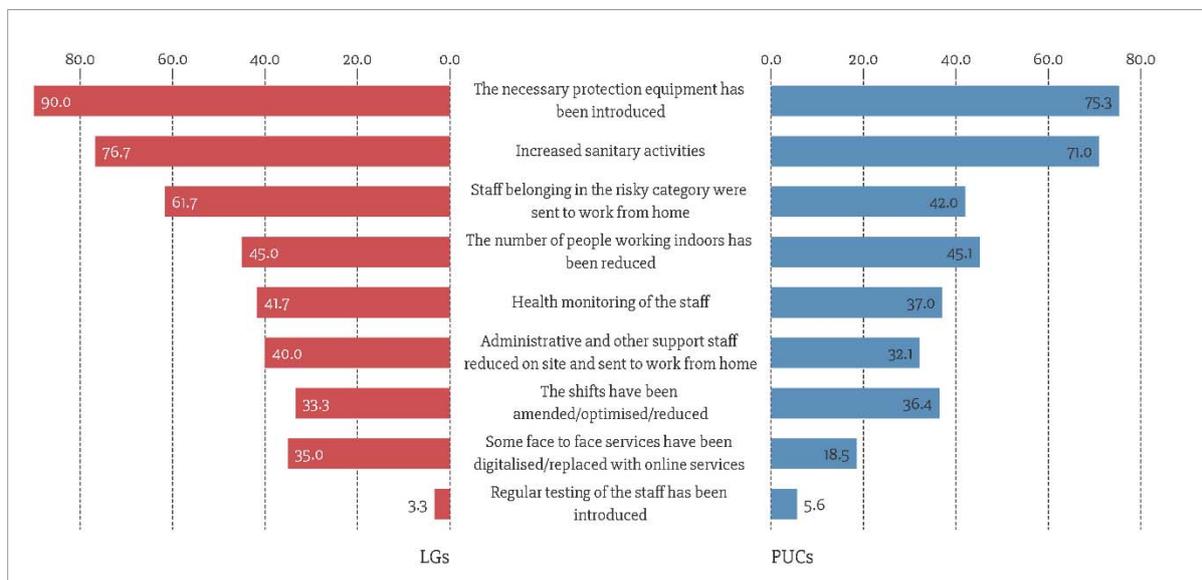
Further analysis of the overall economic impact of COVID-19 showed that although employee productivity increased in lockdown conditions locally, many noted that this productivity is not sustainable as employees have fewer choices of leisurely activities (2020, UNDP BiH). Some of the interviewed representatives of LGs observed a positive tendency that their employees needed less time to do the same work they did before the pandemic, due to the introduced flexible working time. Another important aspect, highlighted by respondents, was relating the increased staff productivity with the fear of losing their jobs.

PUCs had to deliver the work and ensure the uninterrupted provision of services with fewer people, smaller response teams, etc. According to the statements shared by representatives of PUCs, participating in the research, productivity has increased in the operational units of employees in the field of waste collection and WSS (the same work was done by a smaller number of employees). PUCs had to work with a smaller number of employees due to the imposed health and social distancing restrictions, people getting sick and/or quarantined, annual leave, etc. At the same time, many PUCs had to cope with the increased staff costs, as many employees had to be paid overtime for implementing additional work in the field of waste collection, disinfection activities, WSS, etc. Staff had become more responsible, in a way that everyone had to work and deliver faster, the transfer of work for the next day has been reduced significantly, as employees were not sure what might happen on the next day.

Working conditions

All representatives of PUCs and LGs who have participated in the online survey and subsequent interviews stated that they have adapted the working conditions in their institutions/companies. The adaptation measures are provided in **Figure 8**.

Figure 8: Adaptation measures of working conditions within PUCs/LGs in target economies



The analysis of the data shows that the most common adaptation measure was related to the increased sanitary activities in the work premises (76,7% of LGs and 71,0% of PUCs), as well as the provision of the necessary PPE for ensuring the necessary protection of employees (90% of LGs and 75,3% of PUCs).

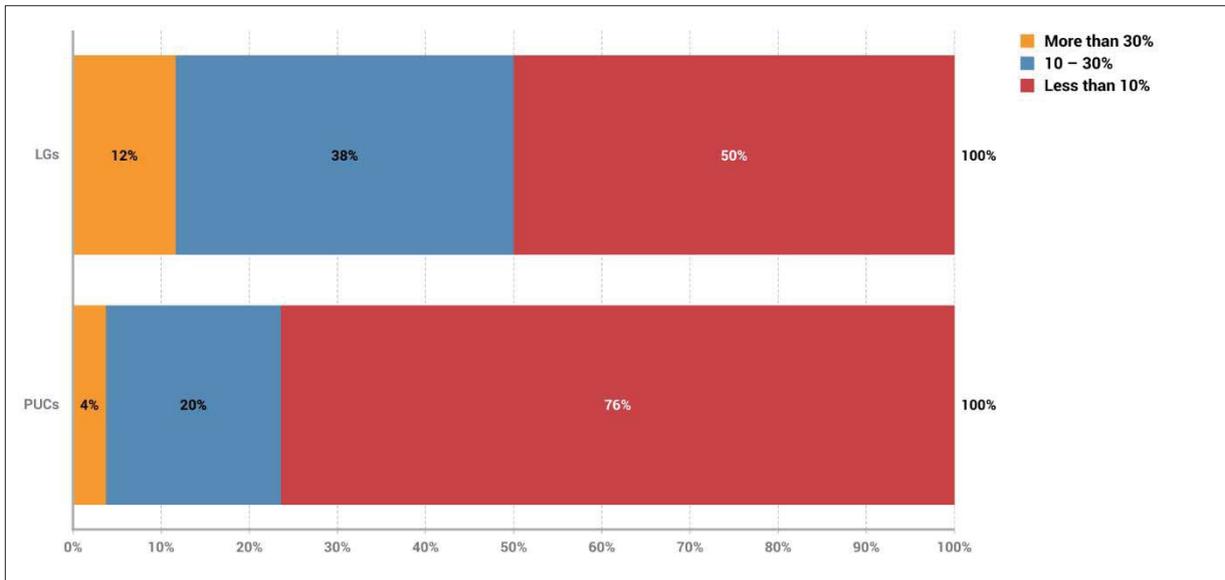
All these measures coincided with the adopted staff protection measures on a national level, according to labour protection regulations. In all target economies, governments imposed strict regulations forcing employers to ensure regular and intensive implementation of hygiene measures in working and auxiliary areas, including cleaning and disinfection of the area, regular ventilation, etc.

Work from home and protection of staff

Based on the recommendations of the relevant health authorities, employers were obliged to provide employees with the instructions for work from home, if possible due to the nature of work, i.e. work process requirements,

online platforms usage, data protection requirements, etc. A little less than 50% of the LGs and 76,4% of PUCs participating in the research shared that less than 10% of their employees were sent to work from home, in accordance with the recommendations of national health authorities (**Figure 9**).

Figure 9: Percentage of employees who worked from home during the COVID-19 crisis



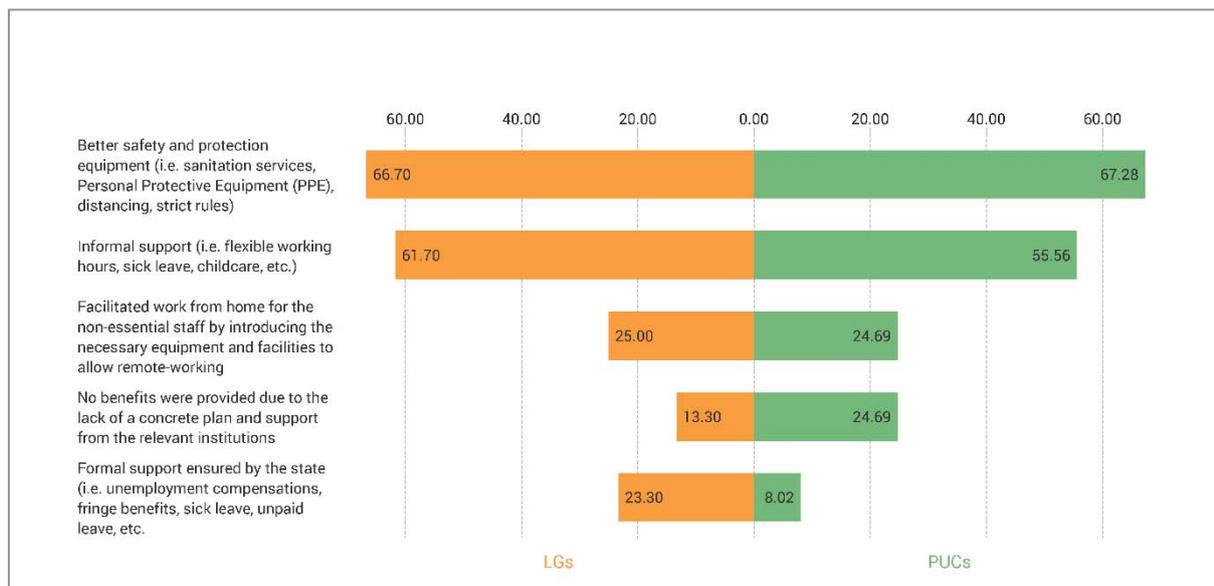
Less than 12% of the surveyed representatives of LGs and only 3,7% of PUCs respondents indicated that they had more than 30% of their employees sent to work from home. The majority of LGs (61,7%) sent their staff members belonging to risky categories to work from home and offered them flexible working schedules. Some 42,0% of PUCs introduced similar measures. The percentage of PUCs is lower due to the nature of activities, and it was mostly relevant to their administrative departments. The majority of non-essential business trips were either limited or cancelled, and meetings were held online. Only a minor part of the respondents (5,6% of PUCs and 3,3% of LGs) had introduced regular testing of their staff. A typical adaptation measure introduced in many local administrations included the separation of employees into smaller independent groups with fewer contacts among different groups as possible. Larger LGs introduced temperature control on the entrance of administrative buildings. Other similar activities included the rotation of shifts in order to ensure the limited contact between people of different shifts.

One of the participants shared a practice adopted by the Water Filtration Station in Obrenovac (Serbia) where the staff has been working on 20 days shifts without leaving the Station's premises. The PUC, operating the facility, ensured the provision of food and other supplies for the staff. This practice was introduced to ensure the uninterrupted delivery of water supply services and for preventing the possibility of infection of the already reduced personnel. In addition, it resulted from the fact that at the beginning of the pandemic when a lot of information was lacking, many things about the virus (i.e. transmission, contamination mechanisms, etc) were still unknown, etc.

Benefits provided to staff/employees

As local governments prepare for work after COVID-19, building a resilient workforce is a top priority for local agendas. This means balancing productivity and outcomes with safety. Creating and ensuring safety at work is essential. In this aspect, the most common benefit that has been provided to the staff of the majority of LGs (66,7%) and PUCs (67,3%) was related to the availability and improved safety and protection equipment (i.e. sanitation services, PPEs, distancing, strict rules, etc.) (**Figure 10**).

Figure 10: Main benefits provided to staff of LGs and PUCs during the COVID-19 crisis



The informal support (i.e. flexible working hours, flexible sick-leave policies, childcare benefits, etc.) provided to employees was also widely recognised as a form of a staff benefit by **61,7% of LGs and 55,6% of PUCs**. Where possible, employees - parents of children under 10 years of age, were allowed to be absent from work to one parent if both parents are employed.

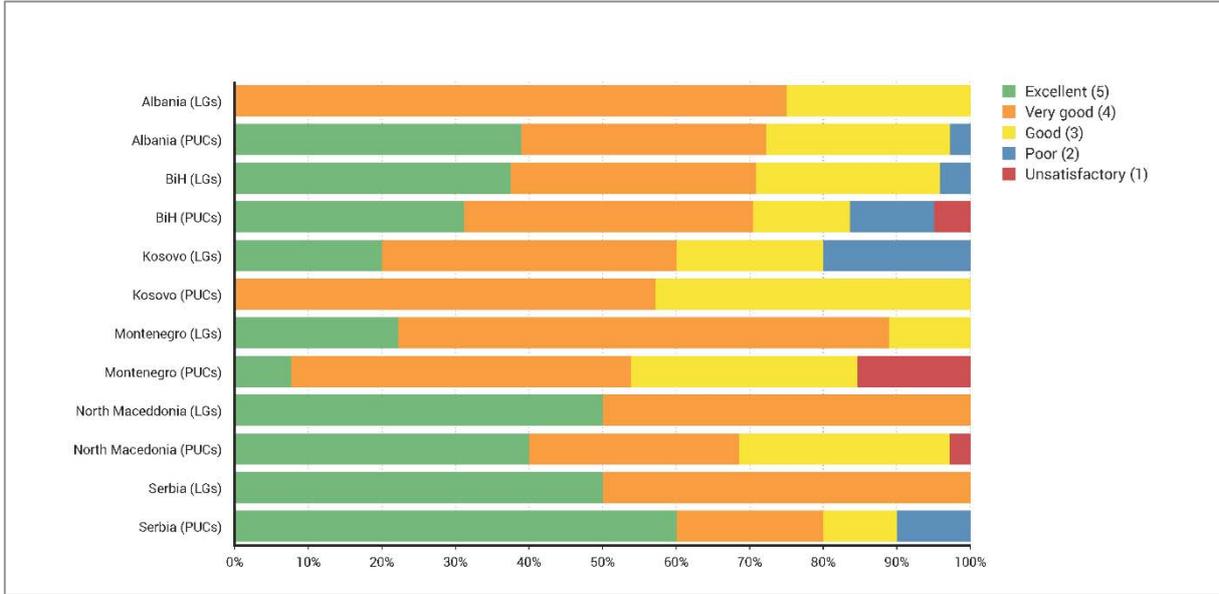
Formal support ensured by the state (i.e. unemployment compensations, fringe benefits, sick leave, unpaid leave, etc.) was recognised only by 23,3% of LGs and 8,0% of PUCs. In this regard employees were allowed to take annual leave and use it according to the law, collective agreement or labour rulebook in accordance with the relevant national legislation.

2.3 Support and cooperation

The pandemic response revealed new ways of collaborating across an ecosystem of partners and introduced methods for operating more effectively. Cooperation between PUC and LG is necessary in any case, especially in times of crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. A strong PUC can only exist if there is substantial and committed support from the LG and vice versa. Strengthening the intracommunity relationships established during the crisis can create a more significant and more integrated role for all local actors (i.e. businesses, non-governmental institutions, etc.). On another level, the cooperation and support with LGAs and APUCs have also been essential in lobbying and advocacy, provision of information, and capacity building activities. Support from the central governments and IFIs, donors, and other stakeholders is the basis for ensuring the timely and efficient response to the crisis and improving local public service providers' resilience.

In the process of coping with the crisis and implementing the measures related to the COVID-19 pandemic, a large part of the LGs (**76,7%**) that participated in the research rated the overall cooperation with their PUCs and service providers as either very good or excellent. This has been further supported by the majority of PUCs (69,1%) which had also appreciated the support and cooperation provided by their LG in the process of the COVID-19 crisis.

Figure 11: Cooperation between LGs and PUCs across target economies



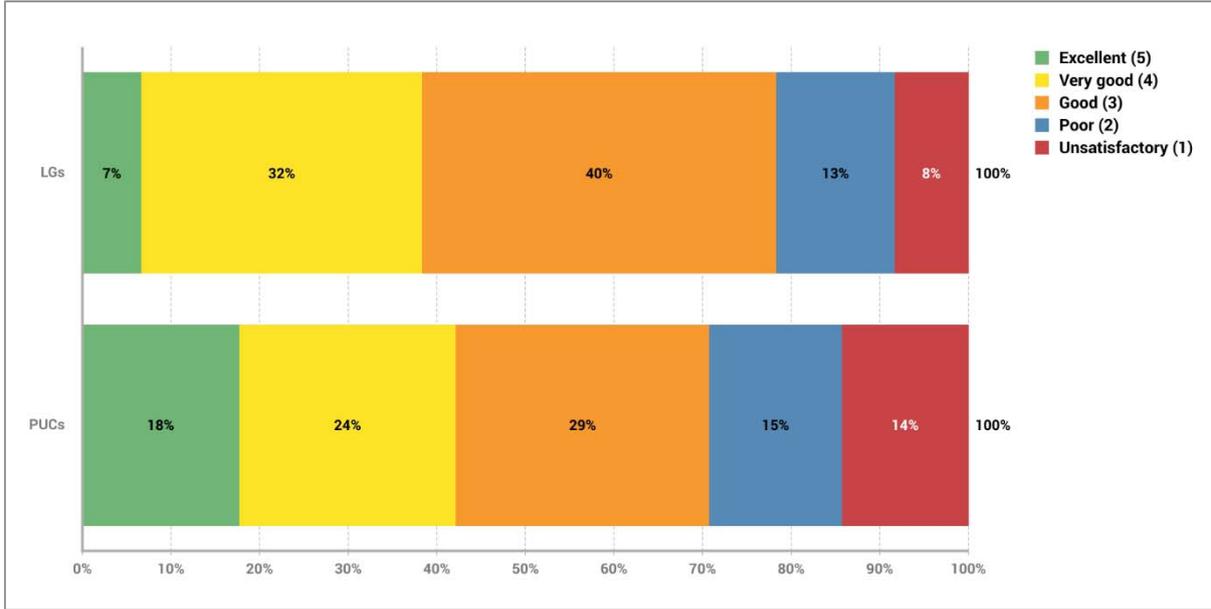
From the point of view of LGs participating in the research, this cooperation was most effective and efficient in the field of solid waste management (53,3%) and even higher in the sector of WSS (70,0%).

PUCs were among those actors that experienced and managed a high level of pressure to ensure the continuity of an essential service in a context characterised by heightened uncertainty and serious limitations to normal operability. Nonetheless, given the absolute novelty of this emergency, some complications were challenging to predict or entirely out of utilities' control (for example, sourcing some essential supplies) (2020, GWOPA). In this context, many PUCs had to cooperate locally with neighbouring PUCs and subcontractors to share information, strategies, equipment and essential supplies. More than one-third of the PUCs that have participated in the survey answered that they were cooperating actively with other PUCs and companies from neighbouring or other regions to exchange information, borrowing assets (i.e. equipment and machinery), essential supplies (i.e. chlorine and other disinfectants), spare parts for machinery, etc. A similar percentage of the surveyed representatives of LGs (33,3%) answered that they were cooperating actively with neighbouring/other LGs for ensuring a better response. This cooperation in the field of WSS provision included sharing of experience and information, exchange of staff and equipment, coordination and joint activities (e.g. disinfection), etc.

Support from the central government and other entities on the national and international level

Local governments need adequate support and assistance in responding to the unprecedented crisis resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. LGs need guidance, information, adequate directions, technical resources and support to ensure the uninterrupted provision of the majority of public services that have been impacted by the crisis. Vertical collaboration with the national authorities and donor community, and their support to LGs and PUCs in providing WSS and other communal services during COVID-19 pandemic is essential to improving their resilience and response to future crisis. Without timely and targeted support from national authorities, LGs are unable to provide services to their citizens and help the social and economic recovery of the local economies and communities (2020, NALAS). This rule also applies in the other direction, as LGs can offer the most efficient and adequate support to national authorities in identifying the key challenges, needs and priorities and spheres that need to be supported at the local level. Expectedly, when asked to clarify the entities that they used or plan to use, in seeking guidance, technical assistance or resources related to the delivery of certain public services, that have been impacted by COVID-19 crisis, the majority of LGs (78,3%) indicated that rely on the support of the central government (i.e. Ministries, Agencies, etc.), IFIs / Donors (30,0%) and other stakeholders (i.e. chambers of commerce, business associations, non-governmental associations, etc.) (20,0%). The overall evaluation of the provided support is presented in Figure 12.

Figure 12: Support provided by the relevant national authorities, IFIs/donors, other stakeholders, etc.



More than half of the PUCs (51,5%) participating in the survey shared that they have requested specific support from their central government, APUCs, regulatory authorities (where applicable), IFIs/donor, other stakeholders. PUCs sought mostly financial assistance (31,5%) from the relevant ministries and institutions on the national level due to reduced incomes and the increased expenses for additional sanitation and disinfection activities. This included exemptions of specific fees; regular reimbursement and/or reduction of VAT; economic support packages for business customers; equipment and supplies; payment of salaries and social security contributions staff, etc. Assistance was also sought from the relevant regulatory authorities for adjusting tariffs for water consumption. Mostly through their relevant APUCs, PUCs shared that they have requested support from various IFIs and donors, such as GIZ, the Japanese Embassy in the Republic of Serbia, as well as national funding instruments such as the Investment and Development Fund of Montenegro, Development Bank of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, etc.

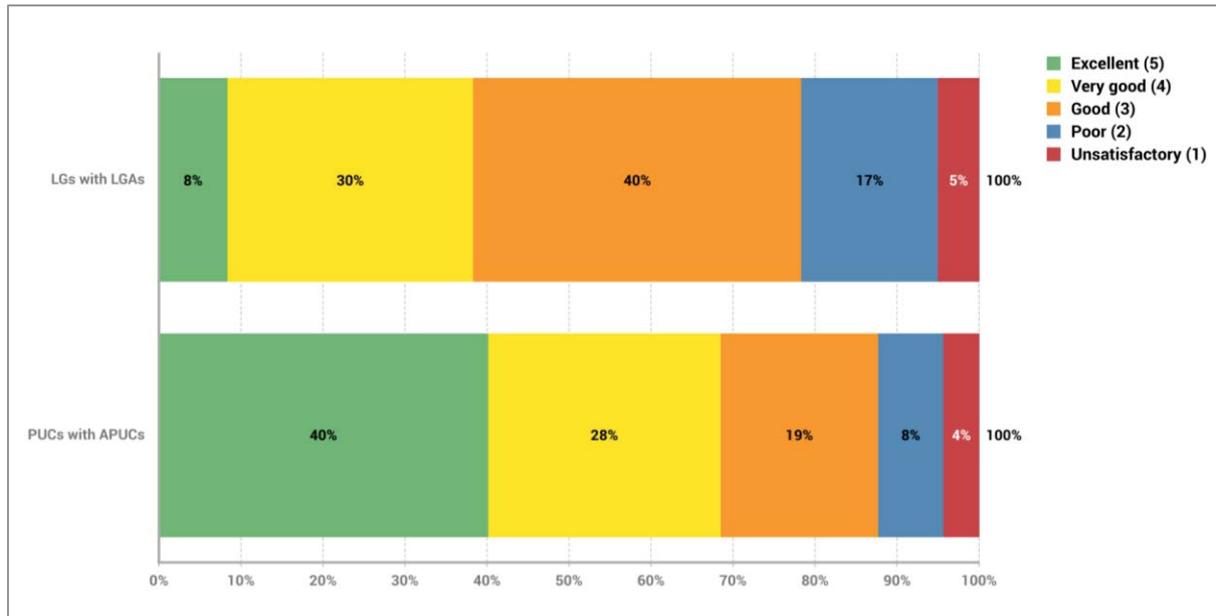
Support from APUCs and LGAs

The survey results clearly show that the majority of PUCs and LGs requested assistance from their APUCs and LGAs on the national level. LGs requested from the LGAs mostly information provision, capacity development, advocacy and lobbying for their interest before the competent national authorities and regulators.

The most common support that PUCs requested from their APUCs was related to the **provision of information** (43,8%), and experiences in combating the unprecedented crisis. A relatively low number of PUCs (12,4%) relied on their APUC for articulating their needs and advocating for identified key issues such as liquidity of PUCs, prolongation of obligations towards international and domestic financial institutions, obtaining additional financial assistance from domestic and international financial institutions and joint communication of important messages to the public, etc. Similar was the percentage (12,4%) of PUCs requesting capacity development support and sharing of best practices.

Figure 13 presents the overall rating of the cooperation between LGs and PUCs with their relevant associations on national level.

Figure 13: Cooperation with LGAs and APUCs



In general, both LGs and the PUCs often request support through the provision of CD measures from their national associations. Capacity development and staff training are particularly important in times of crisis. To address these issues, many of the members of the RCDN have conducted surveys and analysis to create a better understanding of the impact of the COVID-19 at the local government level. For example, the Network of Associations of Local Authorities of South-East Europe (NALAS) has surveyed SEE local governments to identify successful good practices in post-socio-economic recovery. Association of Water Technology and Sanitary Engineering (UTVSI) in cooperation with the Standing Conference of Towns and Municipalities (SCTM) in Serbia, conducted a survey of 76 cities and municipalities to understand better the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the operation and functioning of PUCs. Association of Public Service Providers of the Republic of North Macedonia (ADKOM) in North Macedonia conducted a survey and published a position paper on the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on the operations of PUCs, providing an overview of the existing challenges and potential solutions. The Association of the Kosovo Municipalities (AKM) conducted a study on "Emergency Needs and Socio-Economic Impact of COVID-19 on Local Government in Kosovo". In Bosnia and Herzegovina, Associations of Towns and Municipalities in the Republic of Srpska (ATMRS) carried out an analysis of the implemented measures in local governments (LGs) in the Republic of Srpska, BiH during the crisis caused by COVID-19 and provided recommendations for LGs. In Albania, the Water Supply and Sewerage Association of Albania (SHUKALB), analysed the Impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on drinking water and wastewater systems.

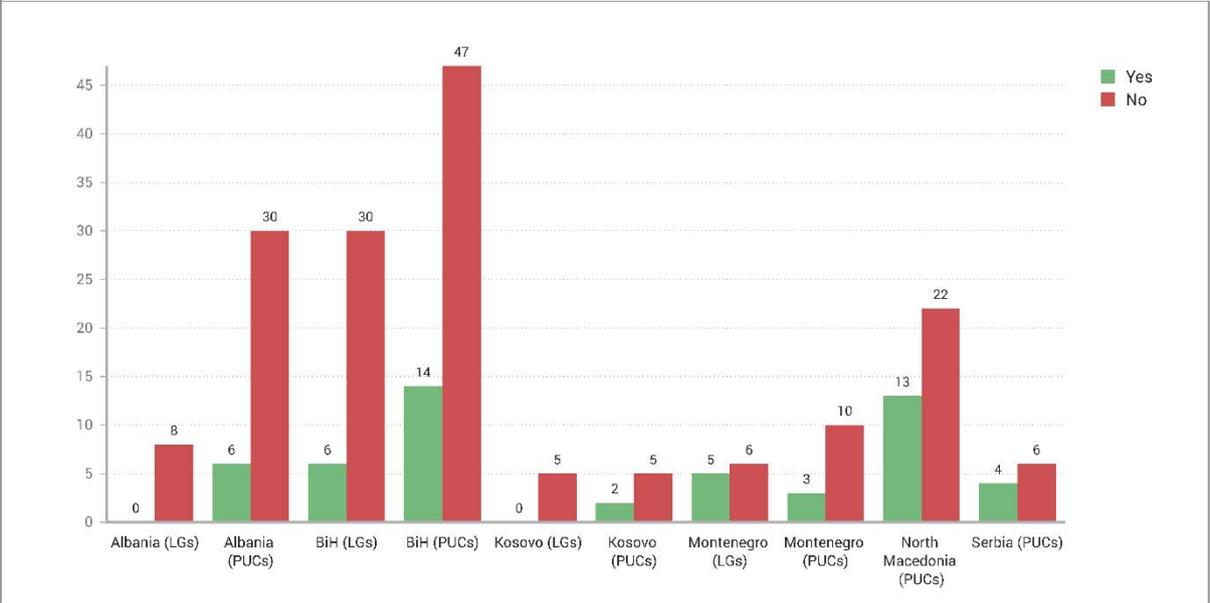
The relevant sources of support and assistance that were provided by APUCs and LGAs are further explored in the Compendium of the good practices and the lessons learned of the support provided by the Ministries, Regulatory authorities, IFIs, Donors and other stakeholders to LGs and PUCs in 6 Western Balkans economies to maintain the provision of WSS during COVID-19 pandemic (Analysis no. 2).

2.4 Crisis management

The COVID-19 pandemic and the crisis it caused imposed "Crisis Management" as a priority topic. Despite the fact that all public companies in the states of the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) have protocols for working in emergency conditions, the preliminary analysis conducted by APUCs and LGAs showed that many PUCs and LGs lack crisis management strategies and operating procedures to cope with crisis situations, especially such as the one resulting from a global pandemic threat. An analysis conducted by ADKOM in North Macedonia showed that that decision making structures on the local level were severely impaired due to lack of knowledge on how to manage crisis situations, and associations as service providers to LGs and PUCs yet lack a proper coordination and communication schemes between each other and with the other, specifically national stakeholders. The study conducted by AKM in Kosovo showed that the majority of municipal directors (70%) were in urgent need of capacity development/training in crisis management, such as the COVID-19

pandemic. These rather negative tendencies were confirmed by the results of the present survey which showed that 81,7% of LGs and 74,1% of the representatives of PUCs across target economies have shared that their institutions/organisations **lacked a crisis management plan** before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic (Figure 14). In addition, less than one-fourth of the existing Crisis management plan across the surveyed LGs covered the relevant aspects related to the local government's response in case of epidemic/pandemic outbreaks and the provision of WSS.

Figure 14: Availability of Crisis management plans in LGs and PUCs



When asked to share some further insights on their current plan for dealing with the COVID-19 crisis, **most LGs (83,3%) established a local crisis management team/headquarters** that has been taking the relevant decisions for managing the crisis. However, it was evident that the establishment, participants and main functions/activities of this unit/team were not based on a preliminary developed crisis management plan. A large part (**63,8%**) of interviewed LGs defined the functions and services that were essential and cannot be interrupted, and similar services that could be slowed down or temporarily disabled. In addition, **64,3% of LGs either agreed or strongly agreed** that they relied on the supervision and support provided by the Crisis Management headquarters established on the regional/national level.

PUCs shared similar insights regarding their strategy for dealing with COVID-19 crisis, as 70,4% adapted their existing risk management methodology to cope with the COVID-19 crisis and defined the functions and services that were essential and cannot be interrupted, and similar services that could be slowed down or temporarily disabled (69,9%). More than half of the surveyed PUCs noted that they coordinated their decisions with the Crisis management headquarters established on the local/regional/national level.

More than half of the respondents from both LGs (60,7%) and PUCs (61,2%) stated that they did not follow a concrete crisis management plan throughout the COVID-19 emergency.

Despite this negative finding, 68% of PUCs and 40,7% of LGs developed or have been in the process of developing a Crisis Management Plan during the unfolding crisis. Furthermore, 77% of PUCs that have developed such plans noted that it covered the relevant aspects of WSS provision in their communities. However, it is unclear what were the protocols that they followed or the source of support / CD that provided the knowledge necessary to develop these plans.

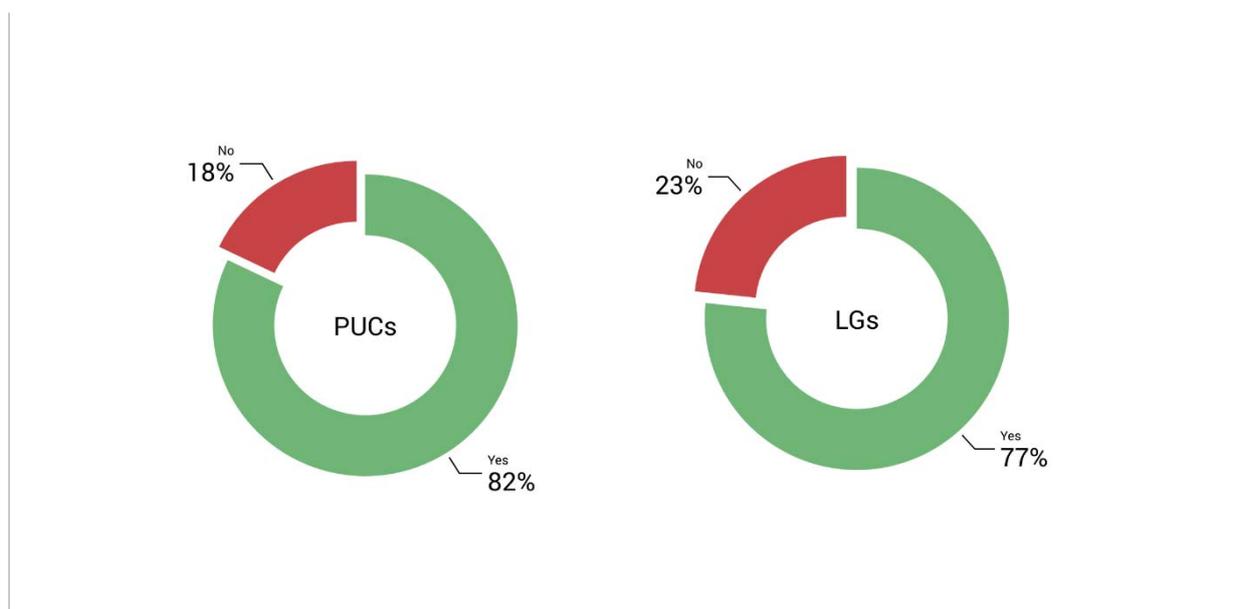
2.5 Communication with the public

Education and literacy are essential in the process of managing a health crisis. The COVID-19 pandemic made people more aware of the role of public institutions in their lives. The focus on public services offers a window of opportunity to re-establish the public service brand. The challenge of fighting a pandemic is also an

opportunity for WSS services that are, in normal conditions and when everything works, "invisible" but when the service does not work, they are high on the public's agenda. **Therefore, the community's communication and constant feedback is essential, especially** when citizens demand more than ever the provision of punctual and timely information. This is an opportunity to change the perception of WSS and PUCs and to return it in a positive sense in the focus of the public and to achieve a greater appreciation of WSS and the efforts of PUCs and LGs to ensure their smooth operation and greater coverage of services.

The survey results show that both the majority of **LGs (76,6%)** and **PUCs (82,10%)** have communicated regularly with the local community on their services and activities in relation to the COVID-19 (**Figure 15**). Both LGs and PUCs engaged in public awareness campaigns, based on their current financial and technical capacities, through media campaigns, collaboration with community organisations, printing, phone banks, updating web information, setting up local call centres to provide information, and translating materials into appropriate languages. All PUCs have put information on their websites regarding emergency contacts and information for various services.

Figure 15: Communicating the COVID-19 crisis with the local community



However, a large part of both LGs (36,7%) and PUCs (35,8%) of PUCs shared an overall impression that the general public is not interested in the transparency of the public sector response, but mostly demanded information on the health and prevention measures implemented regionally and locally. In addition, only 35% of the surveyed LGs and 25,3% of PUCs, participating in the survey, shared that their local community demanded regular reporting and transparency related to their response to the COVID-19 crisis. The most common question that PUCs have received during the initial lockdown was related to the drinking water's safety (i.e. the possibility for transmission of COVID-19 via drinking water) and the relevant health and safety protocols/standards that have been adopted in that direction. Furthermore, information has been sought on the frequency of disinfection activities, payment of bills, the possibility of paying bills and receiving services online, ensuring the uninterrupted water services provision, etc. Many local businesses requested a postponement of payments for public services, taxes, etc. Additionally, many citizens have expressed their gratitude and appreciation for public servants' work during the crisis.

2.6 The way forward

Additional suggestions that were shared by the representatives of LGs and PUCs were related to the tools, support and activities that both PUCs and LGs would require to better manage the COVID-19 crisis and similar future crises. These general recommendations and statements can inform the development of mid-term strategies and, more broadly, help build LGs and PUCs resilience for potential emergencies.

Expectedly, the majority of LGs (96,6%) agreed that the key support that will be essential to manage and cope with the effects of the ongoing crisis and the expected social and economic crisis to follow should include target financial support and incentives. These could include further development of decentralisation processes, fiscal relieve measures, as well as activating grants and subsidies for LGs with limited financial capacities. Although large and developed LGs reported a significant decline in revenues, the crisis also affected the small and underdeveloped communities much more directly. The statements shared by LGs highlighted that financial support efforts on the national level should be based on local strategies and programmes for social and economic recovery. These strategies should be developed with the active involvement of all stakeholders and the community. A sound crisis management plan or strategy should be developed to cope with potential future crises (91,4%). For that purpose, local practitioners and decision-makers should be equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge in crisis management.

Similarly, the majority of PUCs (92.1%) also either agreed or strongly agreed that financial support would be vital for ensuring their recovery and resilience for future crisis. Areas that would require particular attention include liquidity support, activating grants and subsidies targeted for the needs of PUCs, improving access to finance, and alleviating some of the financial parameters and requirements. Cooperation with all relevant stakeholders has also been recognised as an efficient measure to support the recovery process (91,4%). Likewise, a sound crisis management plan/strategy was highlighted as vital by 85,8% of decision-makers at PUCs. However, as underlined above, there is a clear need to improve the managerial staff’s skills and knowledge of PUCs in crisis management. Improved crisis management skills will ensure the uninterrupted provision of essential municipal services (e.g. waste disposal, WSS, etc.).

Communication and cooperation with the community are highlighted by 81,4% of the responding representatives of LGs and 83,3% of PUCs. Despite the difficult position that LGs and their PUCs are facing during the unfolding COVID-19 crisis, both learned that community awareness and mobilisation are critical for ensuring the pandemic’s effective control. The majority of LGs interviewed in the course of the research highlighted the necessity of a functional network of all stakeholders (i.e. CSO, businesses, academia, etc.). Due to the lack of such a network when the crisis struck, all the reaction had to build it up from zero in terms of cooperation. This network should be sustained and expanded on a regular basis, so it could be quickly activated when necessary. LGs, especially, should mobilise resources human and technical – including digital resources and platforms to serve as a place for sharing of information. Without this system and platform – fighting solo is not a solution; knowledge management and action plan are a must.

The expectations of LGs and PUCs in terms of better management of the ongoing crisis and future crisis to come are shown in **Figure 16**.

Figure 16: The way forward





Good practices and lessons learned during the COVID-19 pandemic

The following section presents a collection of good practice examples of the response of LGs and PUCs in WSS provision during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the process of conducting the analysis, the research team gathered a total of 26 good practices from the participants in the different phases of the research.

Following the analysis's adopted structure, one good practice is presented for each of the target WB economies. More information on the remaining good practices is provided in Annex 1 and could be further requested from the authors of the Compendium or through the representatives of LGAs and APUCs that actively contributed in the process of its development.

Bosnia and Herzegovina



JKP "Kostajnica" d.o.o.

Public utility company

Municipality: Kreševo, Bosna and Herzegovina

Population served: 4.000 people

Topic: Support and cooperation with the local community

Brief description: Workers of PUC "Kostajnica" Kreševo, BiH in cooperation with the municipal staff of Kreševo carried out weekly disinfection of streets and public areas in the busiest places in the municipality. The disinfection covered all public institutions, health centre, police station, kindergartens Radost and Kreševo. Dispensers with sodium hypochlorite for citizens with detailed instructions for use have been set up in public institutions in the Kreševo municipality.

There were no layoffs in the mentioned period, although the PUC operated with a loss of revenue with more than 20% compared to the same period last year. The PUC has not received any assistance from the regional and central government (i.e. the Canton administration, Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the State itself), due to the fact that the company is public and not eligible for recovery assistance.

Improvement in the delivery of services: The Kreševo Municipal Service, the Kreševo Health Center and the Kreševo Police Station helped to provide services with daily instructions, prescribed measures and human resources in overcoming this crisis, etc. This cooperation has been ongoing throughout the crisis, and it still continues.

Positive effects for the community: The assistance has reached all citizens of the municipality of Kreševo (especially in rural areas). The support included a delay in the payment of bills of domestic users, exemption from payment of bills of all legal entities whose work was suspended in the period 04-05.2020. In cooperation with the local hospital and volunteers, PUC employees organised the delivery of prescription drugs and other medicines to citizens of the vulnerable groups.

Montenegro



Vodovod i Kanalizacija D.O.O. Podgorica

Public utility company

Municipality: Capital City of Podgorica

Population served: 190.000 people

Topic: Digitalisation of services

Brief description: As a direct result of the COVID-19 crisis and in order to ensure the health and safety of both its customers and employees, PUC "Vodovod i kanalizacija" Podgorica, Montenegro has introduced a large portfolio of e-services. As part of its digitalisation policy, the company has developed and regularly updates a new website to serve as a one-stop-shop for updates on the primary services provided to citizens and to host the newly developed e-services section. These services include online payment of bills for both domestic and business consumers, sending e-invoices to customers via e-mail, e-banking, etc. In addition, there is an option to submit complaints about the services of the PUC via a special e-form on the website. Customers can also self-report their water consumption through a special e-form on the website. Additionally, the PUC introduced a software solution to facilitate the remote reading of water meters via mobile devices. Namely, this solution is intended for

employees on the field doing the physical reporting of water meters. The solution reduces the number of visits of field employees in the company's headquarters and contacts other staff members.

Improvement in the delivery of services: COVID-19 boosted the digitalisation and helped improve the resilience of the company for this and any future crisis of similar nature. The introduction of the new portfolio of e-services and online-based applications raised the level of quality provided by the PUC. It helped improve the company's image and its transparency through the creation and constant update of a website to keep the local community constantly informed of the key services provided by the PUC. The digitalisation of key services helped the company to ensure employees' occupational health and safety, which are the most important asset of the company.

Positive effects for the community: The most positive outcome, apart from the improved transparency and improved trust of consumers is related to the increasing number of consumers (both domestic and business) which started using e-services. The company's future plans include the development of an online information system and an online customer service centre.

Serbia



● Obrenovac

JKP “Vodovod i Kanalizacija” Obrenovac

Public utility company

Municipality: Obrenovac

Population served: 30.000 people

Topic: Optimisation of shifts and work schedule of employees

Brief description: PUC "Vodovod I Kanalizacija" Obrenovac, Serbia manages a Water Filtration Station that supplies the drinking water for the municipality of Obrenovac and the area. During the COVID-19 lockdown, the PUC decided to introduce a new working schedule for its employees to reduce the danger of infection and ensure the uninterrupted provision of water supply. The rather bold measure included the introduction of 20 days uninterrupted shifts for the staff working on the station's premises. For that period, the staff was not allowed to leave the station, and no outsiders were also allowed on the premises. JKP "Vodovod I Kanalizacija" – Obrenovac ensured the provision of food and other supplies for the staff that was taking the shifts.

Improvement in the delivery of services: The main objective of the introduced work schedule was to ensure the uninterrupted delivery of the water supply services by preventing the possibility of infection of the already reduced personnel. At the beginning of the crisis, there have been many uncertainty and fear among the

population regarding drinking water safety.

Positive effects for the community: The community of Obrenovac and the region, covered by the JKP – Obrenovac was guaranteed an uninterrupted supply of drinking water during the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, the contacts between the technical staff, operating the station were reduced to a minimum as to ensure their occupational health and safety.

North Macedonia



JP “Vodovod” – Kumanovo

Public utility company
Municipality: Kumanovo
Population served: 97.000 people
Topic: Improvement of services

Brief description: PUC "Vodovod" Kumanovo was established in 1956 for performing economic activity of public interest in the field of water supply and sewage management in the Municipality of Kumanovo. The company collaborates with the Crisis management committee, established on both local and national levels. It also follows the recommendations of the Commission for Infectious Diseases of the Ministry of Health of the Republic of North Macedonia. Throughout the crisis, the experience of the PUC shown that if the measures imposed by the competent government authorities are fully respected, the danger of COVID-19 is significantly reduced.

The company's main focus was to ensure the health and safety of employees by providing all necessary PPE and relevant health protection/social distancing measure, i.e. mandatory wearing of masks, work from home, reduced contact with customers, and other activities. The management strictly supervised for the

implementation of the measures. Additionally, in the process of the crisis, it became clear that PUC should take their technological development to the next level, i.e. digitalisation and automation of both administrative and water metering services.

Improvement in the delivery of services: The possibilities for remote reading of water meters and the online payment of utility bills proved to be very useful. Unfortunately, only 1/3 of existing water meters allow remote reporting and metering. The PUC relies on the financial support of IFIs and the competent national authorities to complete the automation process. This will allow for reducing contact with customers and reduce water losses. The online payment options provided to customers have proven to be very efficient in lowering overcrowding both in front of payment centres and banks. In the customer service centres, employees were provided with all necessary PPEs and infrastructure improvements to ensure their health and safety.

Positive effects for the community: The community of Kumanovo is kept regularly informed about all activities through the local print and electronic media and the company's website. The transparency and the appreciation of the services by the local community have increased substantially during the crisis.

Albania



Shoqëria Ujësjellës Gramsh

Public utility company

Municipality: Gramsh

Population served: 14.000 people

Topic: Improvement of service delivery

Brief description: Water Supply Company Gramsh, Albania is a small public utility company that manages and maintains the water supply network of the City of Gramsh in Albania. Throughout the COVID-19 crisis, the company relies on the maximum cooperation of both the citizens of the city of Gramsh, but also on the staff and employees of the company, especially the technical branch that had to perform many tasks outside their regular duties and work practice. The team who works on the field, especially those coordinating the physical reporting of water meters, have shown outstanding dedication and continued to perform their duties during the lockdown. Based on the requirements of the relevant health authorities (i.e. Instruction No.395, "General Recommendations to Business Entities Permitted to Conduct Activity in the Conditions for Facilitating the Measures Taken to Restrict COVID-19 Spread") the PUC introduced a "Yellow protocol" which includes strict measures for ensuring the health and safety of company's employees.

Improvement in the delivery of services: As a direct result of the increased motivation and productivity of employees, complaints/request by citizens are serviced within the shortest possible time, bypassing the usual bureaucratic procedures and deadlines for implementation. In this aspect, during the COVID-19 crisis, most requests/complaints have been resolved within 24 hours. In comparison, before the crisis, the regular response time was between 6 and 10 days. In order to decrease the response time and provide a higher quality of services, a special task force has been set up consisting of technicians who were available 24/7 to resolve defects in the fastest possible time to ensure uninterrupted drinking water supply. The company's introduced safety measures helped reduce the transmission of infection among employees, maintain business continuity and create a safe and healthy working environment.

Positive effects for the community: PUC Gramsh paid particular attention to the communication with the local community. The productivity in the field of communicating with the citizens has improved significantly, as the PUC invested in the improvement of customer service, monitoring of reporting and resolution of complaints/requests, etc.

Kosovo



KRU Gjakova

Regional Water Company Gjakova

Municipality: Gjakova

Population served: 178.000 people

Topic: Management and operational practices

Brief description: At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, RWC Gjakova, Kosovo organised a senior management meeting to develop an operational plan to ensure the delivery of critical services such as water supply, maintenance of water tanks, pumping stations, etc. Responsible persons have been assigned that had to be available 24/7 to ensure the uninterrupted delivery of the services and the quality of drinking water.

Ensuring constant water supply has been one of the main priorities of the RWC. For that purpose, the main derivation channel, which is the community's main water source, has been cleaned and managed continuously. Additional care has been taken to guarantee water quality.

Improvement in the delivery of services: In addition, due to the concerns of the society and health officials of spreading the virus through the water supply, RWC Gjakova reinforced the capacity

for taking daily samples of drinking water (chemical and bacteriological) to ensure citizens that their safety is guaranteed. For that purpose, the water quality and results of the daily testing have been published on the PUC's social network pages.

Significant improvements have been introduced in the payment collection activities. In addition to opening new remote payment offices, RWC Gjakova has organised mobile teams for collection of bills from customers in rural areas. This practice had a very positive effect on the collection rate, which is expected to reach 95% by the end of 2020.

During the COVID-19 lockdown, the company has increased the number of maintenance teams, consisting of a smaller number of people to comply with the relevant requirements of health authorities. The units covered all serviced areas of the RWC. As a result, most repairs were carried out for a period of 30 minutes to 3 hours, which ensured the uninterrupted provision of water supply.

Positive effects for the community: The communities and areas covered by the RWC Gjakova received quality and uninterrupted service during the period of the COVID-19 pandemic. The increased testing of the quality of drinking water ensured the local community of the safety of water sources.

Conclusions and recommendations

The present analysis is focused on identifying, collecting and systemising good practices and lessons learned of the responses by the LGs and PUCs of 6 Western Balkans economies in the provision of WSS during COVID-19 pandemic. Similarly to the research process's overall structure and objectives, the following conclusions could be drawn, structured around five different aspects of public service providers, i.e. the provision and quality of services, human resources and staff management, cooperation and support, crisis management and communication with the community.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a test, demonstrating that cooperation between stakeholders operating on the local, regional and national level is the key to overcoming a global crisis with local implications. Both LGs and PUCs are at the forefront of the COVID-19 crisis, "fighting" to cope with its adverse health, social and economic effects, coordinate local actions and activities, and ensure the uninterrupted provision of essential public services. In this regard, the current analysis further highlighted the importance of collaborative approaches to address the COVID-19 pandemic. On the one hand, a strong PUCs can only exist if there is strong and committed support from the LGs and vice versa. On the other hand, both institutions rely on the local community's support and appreciation to prosper and deliver their services in the most efficient and transparent manner.

In summary, the following insights and conclusions could be outlined which along with the provided set of recommendations could form the basis for the establishment of the newly emerging body of practice in the field of crisis management that will be shared and further developed in the frame of the RCDN, thus helping its members to improve their response to the crisis and plan their recovery actions in the post – COVID-19 period.

Conclusions

Provision and quality of services

- As in most areas of the world, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused a lot of negative impacts on many LGs and communities across the Western Balkan economies. Most of the LGs covered by the analysis have enforced strict lockdown measures to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. The restrictions were slowly lifted in May-August 2020 and gradually came back at the beginning of October 2020.
- Most LGs and PUCs rated the overall impact of the COVID-19 crisis on their services/activities as either very high or significant. Due to the rapid spread of the virus, LGs had to deal with frequent changes in restrictive measures, turbulent administrative and social environment, while being on the front line of providing essential services for their citizens.
- The effects of the COVID-19 crisis over the operation and activities of both LGs and PUCs have been quite diverse and on different levels. The crisis caused by the COVID-19 virus pandemic has put hygiene as one of the primary needs where water is necessary to maintain both personal hygiene and the hygiene of private and public spaces. While much of the economic and social life has been shut down, essential public services have continued in all economies. The survey results showed no records of disruptions of drinking water supply or wastewater treatment operations due to the pandemic.
- The quality of drinking water has been insured, in compliance with requirements and standards. In some cases, chlorination has been slightly increased, following the relevant health authorities' directions and with the objective to reassure users rather than as a reaction to health concerns.
- Another somewhat positive nuance of the crisis which has been shared by a significant number of LGs and PUCs is related to the overall impression that the pandemic helped in increasing the appreciation and public image of the communal services, including the uninterrupted supply and access to water that was provided by the public service providers.
- During the COVID-19 pandemic, both LGs and PUCs had to introduce new activities/services which have not been envisaged in the annual work plans. For LGs, these included various social welfare and healthcare services, social services, frequent disinfection of public buildings/ facilities, streets, areas, etc. Additionally, as the majority of residents were spending more time at home, this led to increased disposal of municipal waste and increased water consumption. PUCs, on behalf and in cooperation with their LGs, were mostly engaged in disinfection of public buildings and institutions,

open public areas (i.e. markets, town parks, etc.); functioning and maintenance of disinfection checkpoints in cities and other settlements; maintenance of disinfection vehicles and equipment; etc. As a result of the increased sanitation and disinfection activities, it was necessary to increase the quantities of essential supplies for the provision WSS (i.e. chemicals, detergents, reagents, spare parts, etc.).

- Digitalisation process of local services, including communal services, has been boosted by the pandemic, despite the fact that many LGs and especially PUCs did not have operating online platforms and internet portals to provide one-stop-shop services to their citizens. Many PUCs have rushed the procedures to enable online payment of utility bills through their websites, i.e. embedding special online payment modules, informing customers through e-mails with instructions on paying bills online. However, some smaller PUCs shared difficulties in setting up and operating an online payment system, due to lack of a functional website, administrative issues, lack of human resources, etc.
- The majority of PUCs lack remote water metering solutions introduced in their serviced communities. As a result, many PUCs were challenged and experienced various difficulties in metering and reporting water consumption during the COVID-19 crisis (e.g. hindered communication with users; minimal access to water metering devices; consumer complaints of introduced reporting mechanisms/methodologies; etc.).
- In the early weeks and months of the COVID-19 pandemic, LGs experienced mostly difficulties in ensuring the necessary supplies of PPEs such as face masks, gloves, disinfectants, etc.

Staff and human resources

- During the COVID-19 crisis, the PUCs, primarily owned by LGs, were put in a situation to provide more services with less equipment, resources and fewer people. As a result of the strict social distancing, health and other restrictive measures, the existing human resources and expertise were reduced. LGs and PUCs had to cope with and manage the separation of shifts, sparing of vulnerable groups (e.g. people with previous health issues, people with special needs, the elderly, women with small children) from exposure to contacts, assign non-essential personal to work from home, take care of residents in rural areas, etc.
- The staff and employees of both PUCs and LGs have been mostly concerned about their colleagues and families' health and well-being. Both the representatives of PUCs and LGs confirmed that their employees showed resilience and motivation to cope with the crisis and help their communities overcome the crisis.
- According to the interviewed managers of PUCs and decision-makers of LGs, the COVID-19 crisis had influenced their employees' productivity in various aspect (i.e. delivering social and sanitary services; remote work; operational units of employees in the field of waste collection and WSS; etc.). LGs observed a positive tendency that their employees needed less time to do the same work they did before the pandemic, due to the introduced flexible working time, fear of losing their jobs, etc. Staff had become more responsible, in a way that everyone had to work and deliver faster, the transfer of work for the next day has been reduced significantly, as employees were not sure what might happen on the next day.
- Working conditions in both LGs and PUCs were adapted. The most common adaption measure was related to the increased sanitary activities in the work premises and the provision of the necessary PPE for ensuring the necessary protection of employees. A typical adaptation measure introduced in many local administrations included the separation of employees into smaller independent groups with fewer contacts among different groups as possible. Larger LGs introduced temperature control on the entrance of administrative buildings. Other similar activities included the rotation of shifts in order to ensure the limited contact between people of different shifts.
- Less than 10% of employees of LGs/PUCs were sent to work from home. Based on the recommendations of the relevant health authorities, employers were obliged to provide employees with the instructions for work from home, if possible due to the nature of work, i.e. work process requirements, online platforms usage, data protection requirements, etc.

- As LGs prepare for work after COVID-19, building a resilient workforce is a top priority for local agendas. This means balancing productivity and outcomes with safety. Creating and ensuring safety at work is essential. In this aspect, the most common benefit that has been provided to the staff of the majority of LGs and PUCs was related to the availability and improved safety and protection equipment (i.e. sanitation services, PPEs, distancing, strict rules, etc.). Employers also provided both formal (i.e. unemployment compensations, fringe benefits, sick leave, unpaid leave, etc.) and informal support (i.e. flexible working hours, flexible sick-leave policies, childcare benefits, etc.).

Support and cooperation

- The pandemic response revealed new ways of collaborating across an ecosystem of partners and introduced methods for operating more effectively. Cooperation between PUC and LG is necessary in any case, especially in times of crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Collaboration and support with LGAs and APUCs have also been essential in lobbying and advocacy, provision of information, and capacity development activities. Support from the central government, IFIs, donors, and other stakeholders is the basis for ensuring the timely and efficient response to the crisis and improving local public service providers' resilience.
- In the process of coping with the crisis and implementing the measures related to the COVID-19 pandemic, a large part of both LGs and PUCs recognised their cooperation and partnership as excellent. This cooperation was most effective and efficient in the field of solid waste management and even higher in the sector of water supply, sanitation and disinfection activities.
- Many PUCs had to cooperate locally with neighbouring PUCs and subcontractors to exchange information, borrowing assets (i.e. equipment and machinery), essential supplies (i.e. chlorine and other disinfectants), spare parts for machinery, etc. LGs have been cooperating actively with neighbouring/other LGs to provide WSS by sharing experience and information, exchanging staff and equipment, coordination and implementation of joint activities (e.g. disinfection), etc.
- Vertical collaboration with the national authorities and donor community, and their support to LGs and PUCs in providing WSS as well as other communal services during COVID-19 pandemic is essential to improving their resilience and response to future crisis.
- The majority of LGs indicated that rely on the support of the central government (i.e. Ministries, Agencies, etc.), IFIs / Donors and other stakeholders (i.e. chambers of commerce, business associations, non-governmental associations, etc.) to receive timely and adequate guidance, technical assistance or resources related to the delivery of certain public services, that have been impacted by COVID-19 crisis.
- PUCs sought mostly financial assistance from the relevant ministries and institutions on the national level due to reduced incomes and the increased expenses for additional sanitation and disinfection activities. These included exemptions of specific fees; regular reimbursement and/or reduction of VAT; equipment and supplies; payment of salaries and social security contributions staff, etc. Assistance was also sought from the relevant regulatory authorities for adjusting tariffs for water consumption. Through their relevant APUCs, PUCs of the target WB economies have requested support from various national and international funding instruments and donors.
- The majority of PUCs and LGs requested assistance from their APUCs and LGAs on the national level. LGs requested of the LGAs mostly information provision, capacity development, advocacy and lobbying for their interest before the competent national authorities and regulators. The most common support that PUCs requested from their APUCs was related to the provision of information and experiences, capacity building and sharing best practices in combating the unprecedented crisis.

Information and communication

- Education and literacy are essential in the process of managing a health crisis. The COVID-19 pandemic made people more aware of the role of public institutions in their lives.
- The focus on public services offers a window of opportunity to re-establish the public service brand. The challenge of fighting a pandemic is also an opportunity for WSS in normal conditions and when everything works, "invisible" but when the service does not work, they are high on the public's agenda.

- The regular communication and feedback from the local community have been recognised as essential, especially when citizens demand more than ever the provision of punctual and timely information.
- In support of these findings, most LGs and PUCs have communicated regularly with the local community on their services and activities in relation to the COVID-19. The regular information flow was facilitated through public awareness campaigns, media campaigns, collaboration with community organisations, printed materials, phone banks, updating web information, setting up local call centres to provide information, and translating materials into appropriate languages.
- From the perspective of LGs and PUC, society mostly demanded information on the health and prevention measures implemented regionally and locally. The most common question that PUCs have received during the initial lockdown was related to the drinking water's safety (i.e. the possibility for transmission of COVID-19 via drinking water) and the relevant health and safety protocols/standards that have been adopted in that direction. Furthermore, information has been sought on the frequency of disinfection activities, payment of bills, the possibility of paying bills and receiving services online, ensuring the uninterrupted water services provision, etc. Many local businesses requested a postponement of payments for public services, taxes, etc. Additionally, many citizens have expressed their gratitude and appreciation for public servants' work during the crisis.

Risk and crisis management

- The COVID-19 pandemic and the crisis it caused, imposed "Crisis Management" as a priority topic. Although all PUCs and LGs in the states of the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) had protocols for working in emergency conditions, the majority of PUCs and LGs lack up-to-date crisis management strategies and operating procedures to cope with crisis situations, especially such as the one resulting from a global pandemic threat. More than half of the respondents from both LGs and PUCs stated that they did not follow a concrete crisis management plan throughout the COVID-19 emergency.
- Most LGs and PUCs established a local crisis management team/headquarters to address the crisis and coordinate the decision-making process. However, it is evident that the establishment, participants and main functions/activities of this unit/team were not based on a preliminary developed crisis management plan. Decision making structures on the local level were severely impaired due to lack of knowledge on how to manage crisis situations, and associations as service providers to LGs and PUCs yet lack a proper coordination and communication schemes between each other and with the other, specifically national stakeholders.
- Most PUCs adapted their existing risk management methodology to cope with the COVID-19 crisis and defined the functions and services that were essential and cannot be interrupted, and similar services that could be slowed down or temporarily disabled.

Recommendations

While most of the Western Balkans economies are reinforcing their health systems to face the second wave of the pandemic, LGs and PUCs alike are working around the clock to continue the uninterrupted provision of essential services to their communities. In addition, people and experts are assessing the impact and drawing plans for the post-COVID recovery of their institutions and communities. Although it is still premature to draw any conclusions for the long-run, PUCs and LGs in cooperation with their associations, national authorities and other stakeholders are consulting local actors and preparing strategies to ensure safe and sustainable future for communities. The following recommendations have been summarised as a result of the research and could be taken into account in the process of designing recovery strategies and resilience efforts in target WB economies.

Short and long-term policy measures

COVID-19 is a chance for both PUCs and LGs to solve many problems and issues that have been long overdue. At the same time, they have to learn how to adapt to the new realities and invest in improving their resilience to future crisis. Although each LG and PUC have their unique challenges and solutions, some long-term stereotypes and myths such as digitalisation have been debunked. Many PUCs and LGs became "green" overnight.

Longstanding challenges such as becoming greener, utilising sustainable energy, adopting circular economy measures, etc., are next on the line.

- Digital transformation is on the doorstep of every company and institution. It is considered as one of the key horizontal aspects that enables resilience. Investing in LGs and PUCs efforts to adopt digital technologies for enabling safety, efficiency, transparency, and higher productivity should be at the heart of recovery efforts and strategies.
- Digital solutions enable data collection and information sharing, which are critical for facilitating communication and coordination on all levels. Information sharing is essential during the crisis, and it should be enhanced and supported across all sectors.
- Governments across target WB economies should pay particular attention in activating special funds and recovery programmes subsidies for LGs with limited financial capacities. Specific attention should be paid to small and underdeveloped communities. PUCs should also be added as direct beneficiary in funding instruments, providing them with adequate liquidity support (based on financial health and prospects), grants and subsidies.
- Introducing economic incentives towards "green" and circular economy solutions could open the door to sustainable solutions in response to the crisis. The need for PUCs to continue developing into sustainable, people-centred and innovative organisations is paramount. Resilient water services will meet the future demands of local communities. The relevant concept of "Green utilities" could also be further explored. The focus on green recovery will significantly enhance the resilience of economies and societies in the face of both the severe recession and accelerating environmental challenges². These support measures could include tax reduction, grants/flexible funding instruments, subsidies for R&D, and skills development.
- Both LGs and PUCs of the target WB economies would need support to develop local strategies for social and economic recovery, as well as sound crisis management plans. Local strategies should be developed with the active involvement of all stakeholders and the community. In terms of crisis management, local practitioners and decision-makers should be equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge to develop strategies to cope with potential future crisis.
- Now, more than ever, LGs and PUCs should be involved through their LGAs and APUCs in the process of planning and developing both local and national recovery strategies. LGs should start paying particular attention to public involvement as local strategies should be developed with all stakeholders and the community's active participation. This should be done to increase the ownership of recovery strategies and build sustainable networks to cope with similar future crises. In the forthcoming period, existing subsidy programmes should be further reviewed, new criteria established, and beneficiaries' scope expanded.
- Offer regulatory flexibility for both PUCs and LGs, such as extended reporting deadlines, regulatory exemptions, tariffs relief, fiscal and regulatory flexibility for budget reallocations, procurement of emergency equipment and supplies, etc. All these should be further consulted with the relevant PUCs and APUCs.

Services portfolio and provision

- Ensuring availability of essential equipment and supplies (e.g. chemicals, PPEs, specialised equipment, etc.) that considers potential disruptions of the supply chains by diversifying providers and contractors, stocking of necessary quantities, etc. Based on existing experiences and practices stocking a three-month supply is recommended if possible or larger supplies if possible.
- Development of digital transformation strategies and action plans for LGs and PUCs to ensure the digital transition to increase efficiency, transparency, facilitate information flow and protect employees' health and safety in case of emergencies. Digitalisation efforts should be planned around pre-developed digitalisation strategies and implemented in two main directions: 1) Introduction of online services and portfolio, i.e. administration, customer service and online payment as an alternative to cashier desks are

² OECD Policy responses to Coronavirus (COVID-19), updated 06 October 2020, <http://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/making-the-green-recovery-work-for-jobs-income-and-growth-a505f3e7/>

very common for the Western Balkans; 2) Investing in remote water metering solutions as part of the recovery strategies and support. Such solutions could be provided to only a part of users as PUCs should develop a set of criteria, based on which such transformation should happen (i.e. business customers, domestic customers in remote areas, etc.); 3) Introduction of enterprise solutions for automation of water management processes in PUCs, i.e. water bills prediction models and utilisation of software solutions in that aspect.

- Restarting suspended services and introducing flexible disconnection policy for non-payment of water charges in case of crisis and emergencies. In the case of business customers, additional flexibility could be provided, i.e. liquidity support; temporary vacancy policies; bad debt revisions and other revision policies; etc.
- Planning and introducing flexible payment plans and other customer assistance programmes, especially for business customers of various community and WSS services, provided by LGs and PUCs.
- Taking care of the vulnerable groups and people in remote/rural areas attention to specific categories of users, also through targeted communication and adapted services/payment tools.
- Re-organising administrative buildings, premises and facilities to maintain social distancing (Rearrangement of office settings, movement plans, facial masks, health check, temperature monitoring, frequent ventilation, etc.).

Staff and human resources

- With restricted mobility, whether due to social distancing requirements, health requirements or disrupted public transport, many LGs and PUCs have promoted remote working to the extent possible. It is therefore critical that as many employees as possible be able to work from home effectively. However, in many cases, these flexible policies begin to expire. Each LG / PUC should carry out a detailed analysis of its capacity to swiftly implement remote working.
- Developing strategies for quickly switching to remote working to improve the resilience to future crisis. Such strategies should take into account the existing state of the institution/company and plan/develop a Materials and Tools Checklist for remote work to be used when necessary, including equipment and infrastructure (laptops, communications, remote working software, document distribution tools, communication channels, etc.), documentation policies and data protection (not all necessary hard copy documentation required for work can be taken home), list of tasks/services/activities that can be provided remotely.
- Increase resilience to a future crisis by preparing shift segmentation plans and scenarios (i.e. smaller teams, paid and unpaid leave, different time of check-in/check-out, clean corridors, regular testing, mobile applications for check-in/check-out, health status, etc.).

Cooperation, coordination and support

- Both LGs and PUCs of the target WB economies would need support to develop local social and economic recovery strategies. Local strategies should be designed with all stakeholders' active involvement within the community and the region/state.
- Development of decentralisation processes, fiscal relieve measures and activating grants and subsidies for LGs with limited financial capacities. Particular attention should be paid to small and underdeveloped communities.
- PUCs would require particular attention, including liquidity support, activating grants and subsidies targeted for the needs of PUCs, improving access to finance, and alleviating some of the financial parameters and requirements.
- Improve coordination at all government levels and improve the degree of coordination between the national authorities and the LGs to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of crisis recovery strategies and efforts.
- Engage LGs and PUCs more in research and cooperation projects to improve various aspects and resilience to similar crises (i.e. research on how to detect viruses in sewage waters/drinking water, crisis management practices, CD activities for crisis management, and digitalisation strategies, etc.). APUCs and LGAs could be closely engaged, especially in the field of R&D and CD activities.

- State guidelines and support for PUCs and LGs to operate in emergencies caused by global pandemic. Revision of the already existing operating plans and response strategies of PUCs and LGs, or development and introduction of new plans and response strategies.

Information and communication

- Community engagement and direct participation in the processes is essential. Therefore, it is necessary for PUCs in cooperation with LGs to streamline the engagement of local communities into their operations and policies to ensure their sustainability and increase ownership of measures/solutions implemented locally. In that sense, the local community can provide valuable input and support (actual prior investments take place) to choose non-regret measures, as well as maintaining constant communication with the customers, especially in times of crisis and emergencies such as the one caused by COVID-19.
- The advantages of digital transformation should be further assessed and exploited in the process of communicating with citizens.
- Planning a Crisis and emergency risk communication guide for ensuring WSS security and emergency preparedness. As communication in crisis is a coordinated effort, establishing a crisis communication strategy, along with a team to implement it is essential. These should be developed, operational and tested before the emergency and crisis occur.
- Develop emergency response guidelines for PUCs, communication mechanisms and strategies on the regional/national level to support PUCs in the event of a future crisis, along with templates for public notices.

Risk management

- Even though the short-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic are quite adverse, the experience and lessons learned by both LGs and PUCs should result in the establishment of capacities and skills that will help local stakeholders to manage a future crisis better. In this aspect, preparing comprehensive risk management strategies and plans, especially in the WSS, including detailed risk assessment, existing infrastructure and equipment screening, communication, vulnerability assessment, critical services identification, training and rehearsals, etc., is essential. The existence and regular update of such strategies, along with other tools and activities ensured and coordinated on the national level, will help PUCs be better prepared to prevent, detect, respond to, and recover from various emergencies and crises. It will also help ensure the utility's resilience to re-organise operations and workflows swiftly and efficiently. These strategies should be developed with the broad participation of the local community and stakeholders. Although LGs have adopted risk and disaster management strategies, they should be revisited, updated and adapted to prepare for, respond to, mitigate and recover from all types of emergency situations, including such resulting from a global pandemic. Risk management is a process that is easier said than done as it will take time for PUCs and LGs across target economies to recognise its importance in improving their resilience for future crisis. The experiences in pandemic response and risk management of the Emergency Response Coordination Centre (ERCC) of the European Union or the Federal Emergency Management Agency of the United States of America could be utilised to draft the emergency response and risk management strategies.
- In terms of crisis management, local practitioners and decision-makers should be equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge to develop strategies to cope with a potential future crisis. APUCs and LGAs have a critical role to play in this process by offering customised capacity development measures.

GoodPractices / LessonsLearned

No	Type of institution	Country	City	Description	Contact Organization
1	LG	Albania	Ura Vajgurore	Introduced a special unit to provide food and medicine to people in isolation. Developed a platform where the community can be served online, taking inquires.	Municipality of Ura Vajgurore
2	PUC	Albania	Maliq	Removal of interest on late payments for community services for a period of 3 months during the first wave of the pandemic for all customers. Removal of late interest rates and bond agreements for debit. These measures supported customers with reduced abilities to regularly pay bills.	UkSHA Maliq
3	LG	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Bihac	Daily informing the public for the latest updates in fighting the pandemic. Providing a Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) on water quality, safety of communal waste, possibilities for delaying and deferring payments of communal bills, etc. during the acute phase of the pandemic.	Municipality of Bihac
4	LG	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Foca	Established excellent cooperation with the religious community and their role in educating citizens.	Municipality of Foca
5	LG	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Mrkonjić Grad	Good cooperation with people living in residential buildings to ensure coordination of the regular disinfection activities during the acute phases of the pandemic.	Municipality of Mrkonjić Grad
6	PUC	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Sipovo	Improved coordination of supervision of personal health and protection of employees.	JKP Sipovo
7	PUC	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Neum	Significantly increased supervision of the water supply to address concerns of citizens.	JP "Komunalno" - Neum
8	PUC	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Kreševo	Disinfection of public areas and local roads.	JKP "Kostajnica" - Kreševo
9	PUC	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Gračanica	Improved health protocols, including regular measurement of body temperature, daily check of physical, mental and health condition of employees, etc.	JP "KOMUS" doo Gračanica
10	PUC	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Srebrenik	Established teams for maintenance and supervision and ensuring minimal contacts between different teams and shifts.	JKP "VIK" - Srebrenik
11	PUC	Kosovo	Prishtina	Implemented staff reduction and segmentation measures, age restrictions, etc. Enhanced awareness and information of staff.	KRUP - Prishtina
12	PUC	Kosovo	Gjakova	Increased the motivation and productivity of employees in the delivery of essential communal services. This allowed for fast response for repairs and deliveries of essential supplies.	KRUP - Gjakova
13	LG	Montenegro	Herceg Novi	Employees were provided with regular testing and examinations at the local hospital, covered from the budget of the LG.	Municipality of Herceg Novi
14	LG	Montenegro	Pljevlja	A dedicated call centre system has been established for all issues during the epidemic, as well as System 48 for solving communal problems in the city.	Municipality of Pljevlja
15	LG	Montenegro	Tuzi	During mandatory "stay-at-home" policies, citizens were provided with all services, from food supply to medical care.	Municipality of Tuzi
16	PUC	Montenegro	Cetinje	Improved team spirit and the sense of community among employees to implement the public services for the common benefit of the citizens.	JKP Cetinje
17	PUC	Montenegro	Bijelo Polje	Restricted face-to-face work with customers and transformation of the majority of services for delivering in a completely online setting.	DOO "Komunalno-Lim" Bijelo Polje
18	PUC	Montenegro	Bar	In cooperation with the Association of businessmen of Bar, an initiative was organised for collecting donations for the most vulnerable citizens, including food packages and personal hygiene items.	DOO „Komunalne djelatnosti“ Bar
19	PUC	North Macedonia	Kochani	Organised timely procurement of all necessary materials, equipment, tools, resources, to provide uninterrupted services to customers.	JKP "Vodovod" - Kochani
20	PUC	North Macedonia	Prilep	Introduced a second shift, work from home and increased online communication with colleagues.	JKP "Vodovod i kanalizacija" - Prilep
21	PUC	North Macedonia	Gevgelija	Introduced flexible working hours and work in shifts to avoid contacts.	JKP "Komunalec" - Gevgelija
22	PUC	North Macedonia	Kumanovo	Increased personal protection, reduced physical contact between employees and customers.	JKP "Vodovod" - Kumanovo
23	PUC	North Macedonia	Sveti Nikole	Installed and maintained disinfection systems for vehicles at the entrances to the city.	JKP "Komunalec" - Sveti Nikole
24	PUC	North Macedonia	Bitola	Introduced Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) and reduced contacts between staff members.	JKP "Vodovod" - Bitola
25	PUC	Serbia	Bosilegrad	Prepared disinfectants and disinfected public and residential areas by employees of the PUC.	JP "Usluga" - Bosilegrad
26	LG	Serbia	Lebane	Swiftly reorganised the company activities to ensure the health and safety employees. Clearly divided the responsibilities and activities in the management structure of the company. Provided more frequent information for the water supply and water quality in the community.	Municipality of Lebane

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